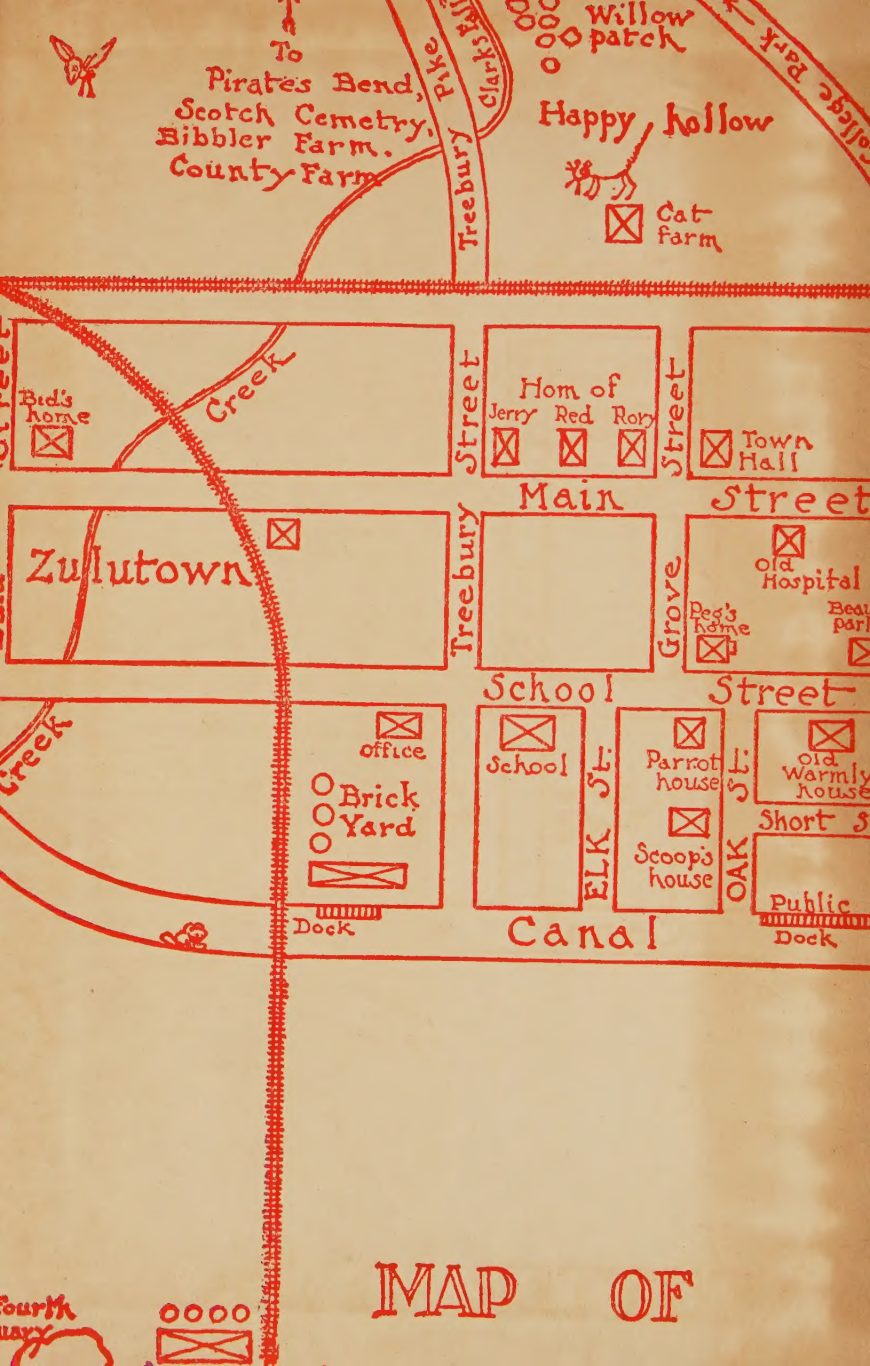
JERRY TODD AND THE BOB-TAILED ELEPHANT

BY LEO EDWARDS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Bibbler Farm.
County Farm
Pike
Clarksfall
Treebury
Willow patch
Happy hollow
Cat farm
College Park
Bird's home
Creek
Street
Hom of
Jerry Red Rory
Street
Town Hall
Main Street
Zululutown
Treebury
Grove
Old Hospital
Peg's home
Beau park
School Street
Creek
office
Brick Yard
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OAK St.
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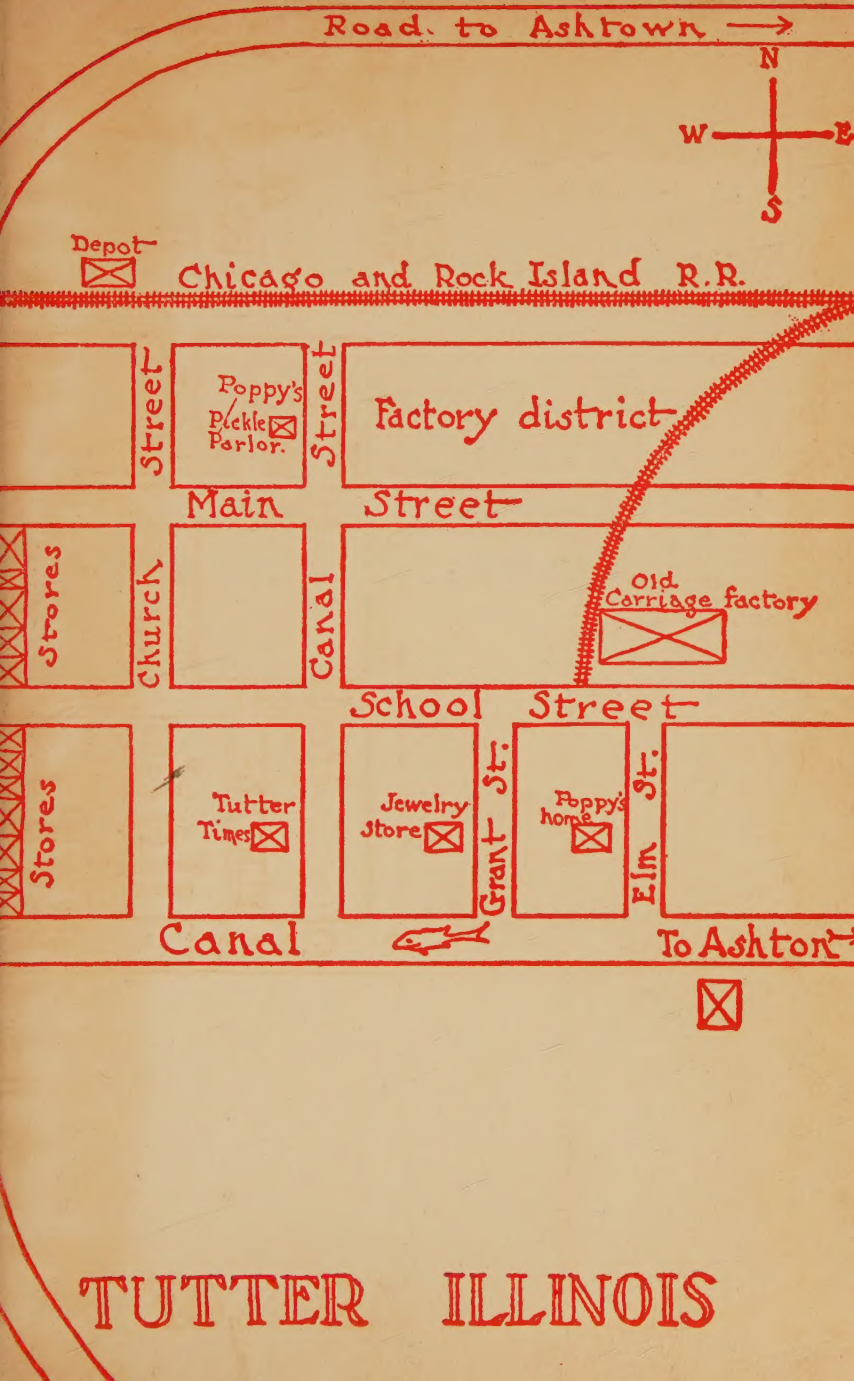
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Street
Poppy's Pickle Parlor.
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Factory district
Main Street
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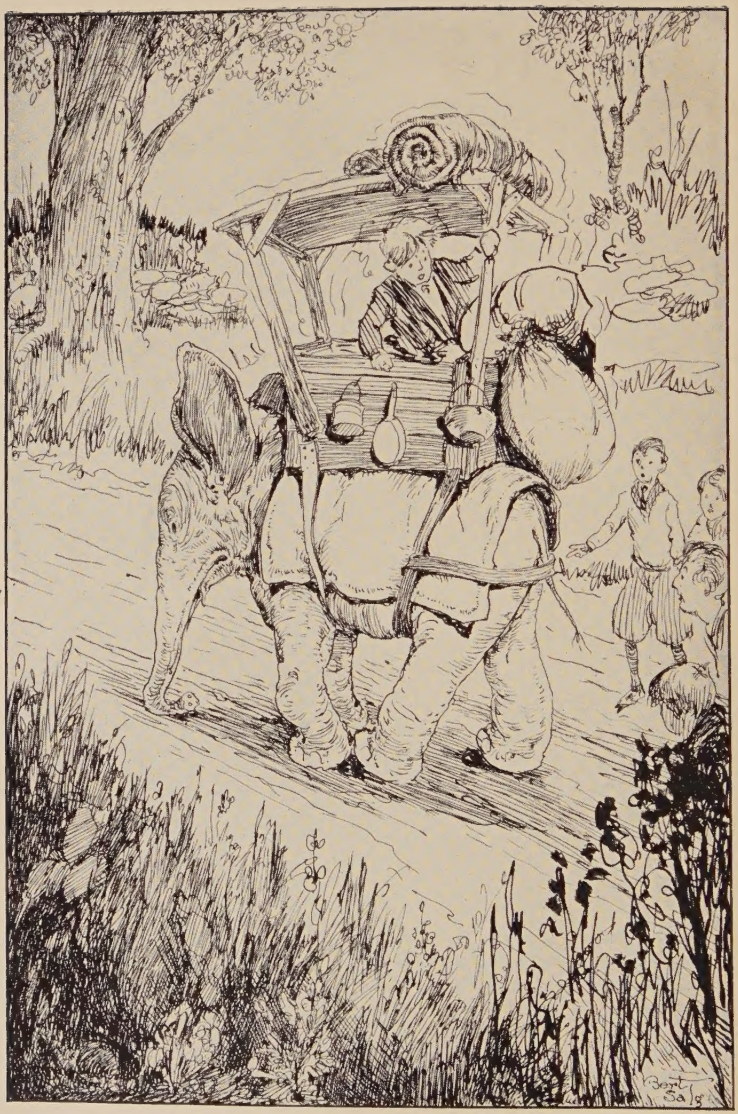
Church
Canal
Old Carriage factory
School Street
Stores
Tutter Times
Jewelry Store
Grant St.
Poppy's home
Elm St.
Canal
To Ashton
TUTTER ILLINOIS

JERRY TODD AND THE BOB-TAILED ELEPHANT



BINGO'S LEGS WERE BEGINNING TO BOW OUT LIKE A LOOSE-JOINTED STEPLADDER.

Jerry Todd and the Bob-Tailed Elephant. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 115)

JERRY TODD
AND THE BOB-TAILED ELEPHANT

BY

LEO EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF
THE JERRY TODD BOOKS
THE POPPY OTT BOOKS
THE ANDY BLAKE BOOKS

ILLUSTRATED BY
BERT SALG

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TO THE

BOY SCOUTS

OF

ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

OUR CHATTER-BOX

THIS is our second "Chatter-Box." The first one was published in *Poppy Ott and the Tittering Totem.*

"Our Chatter-Box" is a new kind of preface, to appear, as a feature, in all of the Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott books. It is a department, in fact, open to all readers.

In this department we will publish poems, built around the Ott and Todd books and the characters contained therein. So, if you have something good in mind, send it in. If your poem is published, your reward will be an autographed copy of that particular book.

We welcome jokes, too—any kind of a short, appropriate contribution, in fact, with the exception of drawings. We cannot use drawings. And, of course, all contributions must be original. As the "Editor," I'll try and have some "news" for you in each succeeding "Chatter-Box." But if you fellows supply the right kind of material, in sufficient quantity, the department will be almost wholly your work.

Address all contributions and suggestions to Leo Edwards, Cambridge, Wisconsin.

LETTERS

I WISH I had a dozen hands! (So says Leo Edwards.) Then, by operating six typewriters at once, I probably could answer all of the letters that I get from boys. Alas, though, I have but two hands.

The fun I have, though, reading these bully good letters. And how they inspire me. So keep up the good work, fellows. I need your letters.

Here are a few of the many interesting letters that I received since the last "Chatter-Box" went to press:

"The boys in my neighborhood sure do enjoy your books," writes William (Bill) Krebs, Tulsa, Oklahoma. "I took a Poppy Ott book to school (we have a home-room period in which some member of the class reads aloud) and that started a landslide. Almost every pupil had either an Ott or a Todd book.

WHEW! I had to read 'em all. Good-night! But we finally got through with all of the books of both series. Please write more."

Many thanks, Bill, for introducing Poppy Ott into your home-room. I'll bet the gang had fun! For I've read parts of my books in school, and I know how the listeners giggle.

And do be assured that more of the Ott and Todd books are under way. It is my plan to write one Ott and one Todd book each year.

"Gosh!" writes Hugh Gilman, Waterville, Maine. "You certainly can write boy stories. I bet you're a regular feller. Because nobody but a regular feller can write boy stories and make the characters act and talk like real boys. A boy can't stop reading your books, they are so natural. And, oh, what fun when the Stricker gang gets chased by Jerry's gang."

I hope I'm a "regular feller," Hugh. I try to be. I'm older than you, by many years. But I'm just as much of a kid at heart as I ever was. Have you read the "Tittering Totem" book? There's a "battle" in that book, between Poppy's and Bid's rival gangs, that will give you a thrill. As Jerry says in the book, "Rotten tomatoes dropped from Zulutown trees and telephone wires for a month." Which, of course, is an exaggeration. But the point is that it was *some* battle. And who won? Sh-h-h-h! Read the book, Hugh.

"I am a member of the Freckled Goldfish club, and have enjoyed your books very much," writes Ray Anderson, Sheridan Road, Chicago, Ill. "I have every book in the Todd and Ott series; and am anxious for the new ones. Please write and tell me when the new ones will be out."

Like so very many boys, Ray wants more new titles. But don't expect too much of me, fellows. One book of each series per year is my limit, though frequently, in starting a series, we bring out several volumes.

If you boys read my books as soon as they are placed on sale, remember that it will be a year before another title in each series is available.

"I'd like to ask you a question," writes Arthur Neve, Springfield, Ohio. "Referring to *Jerry Todd, Pirate*, what became of the cats and dogs that Jerry and his gang turned loose on the island? Did the Strickers take them away, out of pure meanness?"

Well, Art, so far as I know

the cats and dogs are still on the island. And wouldn't Jerry get a surprise if he went back there a year or two later and found almost a million four-legged mouse-catchers roosting in the trees! Rest assured that you're going to hear more about Oak Island, cats and all.

"Last summer," writes Walter Davies, Thome Ave., Chicago, Ill., "my folks took a trip from the Erie canal, New York, through the great lakes to Chicago, which reminded me of your 'Oak Island Treasure' book. Our yacht was small, so you can imagine the danger we were in on Lake Huron when the lake was swept by the worst storm in fifteen years. Waves fifteen feet high! I thought of the boys in your book. Will you please send me an autographed photo of yourself? I will gladly pay for it. I would like to hang it in my room."

Waves fifteen feet high! That, Walt, must have been *some* storm. Sorry, old pal, that I have no photo to send you. I'm going to have some some day. And what a pleasing compliment that you should want to have my picture near you in your room!

Then, from a boy living in New York City, on Melrose Ave., comes a rather long letter, containing a suggested plot for a Jerry Todd book. This boy doesn't write plainly, but I think his name is Fred Larter, Jr. I thank you, Fred, for your suggestions. And who knows but that some day we will have just such a book as you recommend?

"I would like to become a member of your Freckled Goldfish lodge," writes Henry F. Birkenhauer, Clark St., Toledo, Ohio. "I have read all of your books and I particularly like the ones about the *Sally Ann—Jerry Todd and the Oak Island Treasure, Jerry Todd in the Whispering Cave* and *Jerry Todd, Pirate.* In fact, I like these books so well that I am going to make a model of the *Sally Ann.*"

I, too, Henry, am particularly fond of the three books you mention. I call them my "Oak Island" series. And I would like to leave this suggestion with my young readers: Don't read either the "cave" or "pirate" book before you have read the "treasure" story. For the three books are continuous in theme. So, read the "treasure" book first, then the "cave" book, then the "pirate" story.

From Monroe, La., comes two letters, one from Tom

Sullivan and the other from Tommy Hayes, both asking the same question:

"Are Jerry Todd, Scoop Ellery, Peg Shaw and Red Meyers real boys?"

Tom (and Tommy, too), I'm going to refer you to our first "Chatter-Box," contained in the book, *Poppy Ott and the Tittering Totem*, wherein I gave the true facts about the story characters mentioned.

And where does Leonard Watson live? I have his letter here, applying for membership in our Goldfish club. But he supplies only his street address. Whether he lives in Maine or Missouri I have not the slightest idea. The postmark on the envelope is blurred.

Other boys, in applying for membership in our club, have neglected to supply their complete address. And never having received their cards, they may feel that our club is a kind of skin-game. I hope they don't think that; but it's possible. So, if you are one of the boys who failed to get your card, let us have your address right away.

"The Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott books are very interesting," writes Warren Jaynes, Ravina, Ill. "Jerry in particular is a real boy. All he lacks is a dog."

That's a good suggestion, Warren. I'll see if I can't supply Jerry with a dog in a future title.

Nor should I forget to thank Fletcher Weathers, Newman, Ill., for the picture of himself that he sent me. Fletch is a big guy with a good-natured grin. I have other pictures, too. But, alas, due to poor "bookkeeping," these have become separated from the accompanying letters. In sending me pictures, it might be well for you to write your name and address on the back.

"I have received my Goldfish card," writes Donald Pitman, Wilkes-Barre, Pa., "and am greatly pleased with it. I am going to try and get some members for a local club."

That's the right spirit, Don. I understand that many boys have organized branch Goldfish clubs. These boys, I am told, work up initiations of their own and hold meetings weekly.

Which prompts me to inquire: How many boys would like to have me publish a complete Goldfish lodge ritual, initiation, procedure and all (simple and easy) in a future "Chatter-Box?" Let me hear from you.

"When I read about the mummy itch in one of your

books," writes Robert Voges, Medford, Mass., "I laughed heartlessly. But now I sympathize with Jerry and his gang. For I am sick in bed with the chicken pox. Itchy red spots come out all over me. I have an awful temptation to scratch, but if I do the spots itch worse than ever. I have to scratch something, so I scratch the mattress."

Poor Bob! Shall we send him a box of bug powder?

"I have framed my Goldfish card," writes Richard Wilcox, Hartford, Conn. "My father wants to know if he can join."

Sure thing, Bob—*if* he's a Jerry Todd fan. That's the main requirement. And I'm glad you treasure your membership card. Years from now it may mean a great deal to you.

"After I read one of your books," writes Jack Read, Niagara Falls, N. Y., "the most of my paper money was invested in similar books. I have nothing to regret, for they have been well worth the money. Even my mother enjoys them. I have often wished I could have the fun and excitement that Jerry and his chums have. But I have a good father and a good mother; and what more could any boy wish for?"

Jack, I'm very proud of you for speaking so nicely about your parents. And I'm glad that your mother, too, enjoys my books.

To that point, it would interest me to learn if other boys' parents read my books. Suppose you write and tell me.

"Ever since the day a friend of mine lent me *Jerry Todd and the Whispering Mummy*," writes Eugene Olshansky, Cropsey Ave., New York, N. Y., "I've been crazy over Jerry Todd. For a Christmas present I received *Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot*. My brother has *Poppy Ott's Seven-League Stilts*. Then I saved up my money and bought *Poppy Ott and the Galloping Snail* and *Poppy Ott's Pedigreed Pickles*. Yesterday I bought *Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish*. And if ever there was a happier kid than me when I read your preface about the club, I'd like to see him. I'm fourteen years old."

That's a bully good letter, Eugene.

And now, fellows, let me hear from you, if you want to be represented in the next "Chatter-Box." Try and strike an original note in your letters—don't just say: "I like your books, etc." That isn't news. If there's nothing in

your letter of interest to other boys we probably won't find room for it.

FLORIDA

A LARGE part of this book was written in St. Petersburg, Florida, where Mrs. Edwards and I are spending the winter.

I find that the boys down here are just as fine and manly as the boys up north. And so I am dedicating this volume to the Boy Scouts of St. Petersburg, hoping that before I leave here in the spring of 1929 I will have become better acquainted with them.

FRECKLED GOLDFISH

LESS than a year ago we organized a club, called the Secret and Mysterious Order of the Freckled Goldfish. To-day we have upwards of 2,000 members in our club.

Here is how the idea originated: I had just written a book called *Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish.* In the book Poppy and Jerry get up a "lodge," called the Freckled Goldfish. Boy pals of mine, who read the manuscript before it was turned over to the publisher, asked me eagerly if they could get up a local lodge, patterned after Poppy's.

Which gave me an idea. Why not get up a club, of national scope, open to all Poppy Ott and Jerry Todd fans everywhere?

So we went ahead on that line. We had membership cards printed; and we bought a big book in which to record the names and addresses of all members. Announcing the club in the preface of the "Goldfish" book, we soon heard from boys wanting to join. And now, as I say, we have a very large (and still growing) membership list.

The club is purely a "fun" proposition. There are no dues; and the responsibilities are light. If you have a kindly feeling toward Poppy and Jerry—in other words, if you are a Poppy Ott and Jerry Todd fan—you are eligible to join.

Mr. Bert Salg, the popular illustrator of these books, designed our membership card, which contains a comical picture of Poppy's Freckled Goldfish, together with the rules and regulations—all printed on the card. Then, too, each card contains my own personal autograph.

Our big membership book is one of my choicest possessions. And I'd like nothing better than to have the names of all

of my boy pals in this book. So please send in your name if you are not already a member. Then, too, I'd appreciate having members organize local clubs, thus bringing in new members.

To join, observe these simple rules:

(1) Print or write your name carefully.
(2) Supply your complete address.
(3) Give your age.
(4) Enclose four cents in U. S. postage stamps.
(5) Address your letter to Leo Edwards, Cambridge, Wisconsin.

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LEO EDWARDS' BOOKS

Here is a list of Leo Edward's published books:

THE JERRY TODD SERIES

Jerry Todd and the Whispering Mummy
Jerry Todd and the Rose-Colored Cat
Jerry Todd and the Oak Island Treasure
Jerry Todd and the Waltzing Hen
Jerry Todd and the Talking Frog
Jerry Todd and the Purring Egg
Jerry Todd in the Whispering Cave
Jerry Todd, Pirate
Jerry Todd and the Bob-Tailed Elephant
Jerry Todd, Editor-in-Grief
Jerry Todd, Caveman
Jerry Todd and the Flying Flapdoodle
Jerry Todd and the Buffalo Bill Bathtub

THE POPPY OTT SERIES

Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot
Poppy Ott's Seven-League Stilts
Poppy Ott and the Galloping Snail
Poppy Ott's Pedigreed Pickles
Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish
Poppy Ott and the Tittering Totem
Poppy Ott and the Prancing Pancake
Poppy Ott Hits the Trail

THE TUFFY BEAN SERIES

Tuffy Bean's Puppy Days
Tuffy Bean's One-Ring Circus
Tuffy Bean at Funny-Bone Farm
Tuffy Bean and the Lost Fortune

THE ANDY BLAKE SERIES

Andy Blake
Andy Blake's Comet Coaster
Andy Blake's Secret Service
Andy Blake and the Pot of Gold

JERRY TODD AND THE BOB-TAILED ELEPHANT

CHAPTER I

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

Boy, did we ever have fun with that peachy little elephant. I'll never forget it as long as I live. And having seen the comical pictures in this book I dare say that the elephant is the thing you want to hear about first.

But this is going to be a long story. Starting at Hallowe'en it doesn't end till the following summer. And before I can tell you about the elephant I've got to tell you about Henny Bibbler, the boy who disappeared so mysteriously.

Henny lived on a little farm just north of town in Happy Hollow. He's the kid who used to wear the little red hat to Sunday school. Boy, that was some hat. Every chance we got we tipped it up behind and slid it down on his nose, which may explain why he never was much of a hand to mix with us.

So I was a long time getting acquainted with

him. I found out, though, when we did get together, that he was a swell kid. Full of pep, with a lot of original ideas. And just before his amazing disappearance he and I got real chummy. So much so, in fact, that Red Meyers got jealous.

I dare say you remember Red. For he appears in the most of my books. His temper is as fiery as his hair. And *eat?* Say, he has a stomach like a goat. I never saw that kid when he wasn't hungry. His mother tells the story that he asks for pie in his sleep. Mrs. Meyers is nice. Still, I've never forgotten the mean things that she said about our elephant. As though it was any discredit to Bingo that he mistook her imported porch rug for a hay sandwich. *Good*-night! The poor little animal had to eat. And it *was* a grass rug. I think he showed intelligence. For everybody knows that grass and hay are the same thing.

Red has beautiful freckles parked all over his face like pimples on a pumpkin. But if he's little in size he sure makes up for it in gab. Bla! bla! bla! Dad laughingly calls him the little squirt with the big squawk.

Another recent addition to our gang is Rory Ringer, a little English kid. He calls owls "howls" and eagles "heagles." Gee! He sure is a card. At school the teacher hardly ever dares to call upon him to read aloud. For you

can imagine what a class of lively boys would do if one of their number got up and dished out a lingo like this:

"Once upon a time there was a 'ermit who 'ad a trained 'awk. And the trained 'awk's name was 'Enery. One day the 'ermit took 'Enery the trained 'awk into the woods to 'unt. That day 'Enery the trained 'awk brought down two heagles and a howl. But the 'ermit could not heat heagles and howls. So 'Enery the trained 'awk caught for 'is master the 'ermit a brace of 'ares."

And so on and so forth.

Other members of our gang, as you'll recall, are Scoop Ellery and Peg Shaw. In fact Scoop has long been our leader. And a bully good leader he is, too. *Smart?* Well, I hope to snicker he's smart. But then he should be. For Mr. Ellery is one of the keenest business men in Tutter. And how lovely for us that he has a candy counter in his store. Um-yum-yum! Scoop is a big asset to our gang, all right.

Peg Shaw is a great big guy with cast-iron muscles, like the blacksmith in the chestnut-tree poem. But though we differ in size we're practically the same age. Peg may be a month or two the oldest. But not much. His folks shoved a lot of husky grub into him, I guess. And it turned into muscle. I never saw him

pick a scrap in my life. He isn't that kind of a kid. But don't get the foolish notion that you can shove him around. I guess not. He knows how to take care of himself. And he knows how to help his pals, too, good old scout that he is.

Now, as I say, Henny Bibbler had been admitted into our gang. And he and I were together a great deal. In fact we shared the same double seat at school, with Red and Rory just ahead of us. Scoop and Peg sat across the aisle. So you can see how easy it was for the six of us to pass notes and otherwise make outside plans. Sometimes Henny would play games with me after school. And other times I'd go home with him. Then, too, we frequently stayed all night with each other.

He never was much of a hand to talk about family affairs. And I used to wonder why his pa and ma didn't live together as a pa and ma should. Mr. Bibbler lived in a little cabin on one side of the winding creek, as it threads its way through their small farm, and Mrs. Bibbler lived in the farmhouse on the other side of the creek. Henny sort of divided his time between the two places, having two birthdays and two Christmases. One day when he was playing at my house I overheard Mother and Dad talking about him. They looked at him kind of sober-like and said it was ridiculous for his pa

and ma, good Methodists that they were, to let a little thnig like dyed hair and jet earrings break up the peace of their home. It was bad for Henny, they said. For he was just at the age where he needed a combined father's and mother's care and not a half-and-half substitute.

Dyed hair and jet earrings! That didn't make sense to me. And I came right out and asked Henny what my folks meant. I kind of wished I hadn't, though, when I saw the blood rush to his face. Gee! I could tell, too, that something was hurting him inside. And when he answered me his voice was as stiff as a poker.

"Sometimes I get all out of patience with ma and pa. And I'd like nothing better than to take them across my knee and give them a good paddling."

"You'd look funny," I grinned, "paddling your big pa. Maybe in the end you'd get the worst of it. But it's none of my business," I added hastily. "I didn't mean to butt in, Henny. Just forget what I said."

"No," he waggled, kind of determined-like. "I'm going to tell you all about it. Not that I want to run down my folks. No boy should do that. But now that you come out to my house so often I think you ought to know just how silly they are. Kids quarrel and get over it.

They don't let it make them mean and sour inside. But parents as old as mine ought to set a better example."

"Have they been quarreling?" I inquired curiously.

"They did before pa built the new cabin and went there to live. But now they don't even speak to each other."

"What did they quarrel about?" I further inquired.

"That's the silly part," his face flushed again. "It makes me feel foolish to tell you about it. Ma's earrings started it."

"Earrings?" I looked at him with added curiosity.

"Sure thing. You've seen her wear them. Those big black ones. Pa got mad one day (you know how he flares up over a little of nothing) and wanting to say something mean, like people do when they lose their temper, he told her that it wasn't civilized for women to wear earrings. And he called her a barbarian."

"Gee!" I grinned. "I can imagine what she told him."

For it's a fact that Mrs. Bibbler, quick-tempered herself, can talk faster and say more in a given time than any two women in Tutter. Boy, she sure can spread the gab around. Some people say she talks too much. But that's all

right. If she wants to talk it's her own business. Certainly, this is a free country.

"Yes," Henny nodded, "ma said a mouthful. For she was mad enough at pa to claw his eyes out. Earrings, she fired back at him, wasn't half as ridiculous as dyeing one's hair with shoe blacking."

I remembered then how black Mr. Bibbler's hair was. And I had wondered at it. For he was a man of sixty or more. And usually men of that advanced age have faded hair.

"Well," Henny continued his story, "they got to going it hotter and hotter, like a couple of silly kids. Finally pa ran out of the house. He wasn't going to live with a freak, he said, to be reminded of barbarians every time he looked at her. Either the earrings had to go or he'd go. He should have known, though, that ma wouldn't give up her earrings—not when he talked that way. So they separated. And she told him never to come back until he had the good sense to let his hair grow red, the way God made it, instead of plastering it over with shoe blacking. Which, of course, made him madder than ever. It wasn't shoe blacking, he stormed. It was hair dye. But ma said it was just as bad as shoe blacking the way it got on the towels and pillow cases, and she wasn't particular about a name for the nonsensical stuff."

"But why does your pa dye his hair?" I inquired.

"That's exactly what I asked him. Red hair, I said, wasn't anything to be ashamed of. But he hates it, I guess. Anyway a lot of elderly people dye their hair, as I understand it. So it isn't anything to hold against him. But I wish you could have seen him, Jerry, the day he fell in the creek. Half of his hair was red, where the water got at the dye, and the other half was black. It was the funniest sight that I ever saw in all my life. That was the time he ran me down and paddled me. Remember? But I should worry. I had a good laugh anyway. This quarrel of theirs, though, is no laughing matter. And when I go to bed at night I lay there for hours wondering if there isn't something I can do to bring them to their senses. I've talked to them. I've talked cross, too. But it does no good. They can't fool me, though. I know that deep in their hearts they're really hungry for each other. But they're both too stubborn to give in."

So now you know the truth about Henny's parents. And I dare say it's your opinion that his pa and ma showed mighty poor sense in thus letting their tempers get away from them. For grown-up people who get married so solemn-like shouldn't act like kids. They should

be willing to give and take. To quarrel over earrings and dyed hair was baby stuff.

Henny really had better sense than his two parents put together. And afterwards he talked with me a lot about his family troubles, confiding in me how unhappy it made him to have his pa and ma act so silly.

"Why," said he, kind of hot-like, "they're the laughingstock of the town. For everybody knows about their quarrel. *Earrings* and *shoe blacking!* Wherever I go people look at me kind of sympathetic-like. And how I hate it. Jerry," he added fiercely, "I want you to help me. And between the two of us we're going to bring my ma and pa together."

Red Meyers, though, thought that Henny was lucky.

"Two birthday cakes," said he, in that hungry way of his, "and two Christmas dinners. Um-yum-yum! I wish *my* pa would dye his hair with shoe blacking. Then if he and ma separated I could eat all of my meals at both places."

Henny, though, isn't like Red. And it added nothing to his life to have a birthday cake one day with his ma and another birthday cake the next day with his pa, only Mrs. Bibbler's cake always was the best, with no lumps of flour in it, for cooking is a woman's job. Still, Henny's

pa was pretty handy around the kitchen, having lived alone for more than two years.

I've been there with my chum when the old man was cooking things. One day he was frying doughnuts and the grease in his iron kettle got afire. The house, which never looked neat like Mrs. Bibbler's on the other side of the creek, got smoked up worse than ever. And I thought then, as I looked around, how silly it was for him to live like this. But it's a fact that his bushy hair got blacker and blacker each month, which in itself showed that he was so determined not to give in that he was using a lot more shoe blacking than was necessary. And to show how *she* felt about it, Henny's ma kept the big jet earrings in her ears all the time, week days and Sundays.

It was getting along toward the last of October, with a cool crispy feeling in the morning air which made a fellow think of coming snowstorms and ice skating. The summer's bully. But there's heaps of winter fun in a small town like ours. And we're particularly fortunate in having so many streams and ponds. On moonlit winter nights hundreds of grown-up people turn out to skate on the big first quarry. Which, of course, pleases the kids, myself included. We have big bonfires. Sometimes we have "hot-dogs," only Rory calls them " 'ot-dogs." When we have a special treat like that

Mrs. Meyers always goes and sits beside the fire. For one time Red ate eleven "weenies" and the doctor bill set Mr. Meyers back fifteen dollars. So it's cheaper, Red's mother thinks, to sort of follow him around on an occasion of that kind. Then, too, speaking of our winter fun, we build huge snow forts and have pitched battles. But before the snow and ice comes we have the fun of foraging in the woods for walnuts. And that is what we were doing the Saturday morning that we ended up in the yard of the old Rumson place.

It was here that Mr. Arnold Rumson, a sexton, hung himself in the attic. And for that reason a lot of superstitious people believe that the house is haunted. So no one lives there. The windows and doors are boarded up. And the lilac bushes that Mrs. Rumson planted in the yard a short time before her death are so tall that you can hardly see the house from the lane.

It's fun to fool around a place like that. And it was added fun to-day for we had Red and Rory along. Do you know that a great many English boys believe in ghosts? Rory says that they do. And he listened with eyes as big as saucers while I told him the story of the three-legged ghost (Dad says it's a calf with three white legs and one black one) as it is to be found here on Hallowe'en, clattering in and

out of the lower rooms. Then up in the attic was the headless ghost of the sexton himself. Br-r-r-r! It was all right to come here in the daytime, I said. But it was no place to hang around at night, especially on Hallowe'en.

"But what became of the sexton's 'ead?" Rory wanted to know.

"I heard," Henny put in, "that his head dropped off when they cut him down."

"But 'ow can 'e see," the smaller one further inquired, "if 'e 'asn't got a 'ead?"

"He feels," said Henny. "He's got long snaky arms."

"And you say 'e talks?"

"Sure thing."

"And yet 'e 'asn't got a *'ead?*"

"The voice comes out of his neck."

"What does 'e say?"

"'Give . . . me . . . back . . . my . . . head! Give . . . me . . . back . . . my . . . head!'"

Rory had heard enough.

"Well," said he, picking up his bag of walnuts, "Hi'm ready to start for 'ome if you guys are."

But Henny and I were determined to explore the old house, the more so when we discovered that some one had nailed a human skull over the back door. Was it the sexton's skull? Probably not. Still, the sight of it gave me a queer feeling.

Leading the way through the cluttered yard, the bushes of which towered many feet above our heads, Henny suddenly stumbled. And there in front of him was an open well, at the bottom of which we could see a pool of wicked-looking water.

"Gee!" said he, when I grabbed him at the brink of the yawning hole. "That was a narrow escape for me, all right."

Later, having found a loose window board, he and I ran through the house, yelling: "Get out of our way, you crummy old ghost, or we'll kick the seat of your pants off." And finding that nothing harmed us, Red and Rory finally joined us. Climbing the stairs we found ourselves in a room with bare rafters. And there, just as it had been left by the coroner, was the rope with which the sexton had ended his life. Jumping up, Henny grabbed the rope, swinging back and forth. But I wouldn't touch it. And it is well for me that I didn't. For suddenly the rope broke, spilling Henny on the dirty floor.

Red almost had a fit when he heard the noon whistles, so afraid was he that he'd miss his dinner. And yelling to Rory to follow him, he dashed down the stairs.

"Aren't you coming, Jerry?" he looked back, as he started off with his bag of nuts.

"No," Henny spoke for me. "My ma is expecting him to eat dinner at our house."

CHAPTER II

HALLOWE'EN

Red and Rory having disappeared down the haunted-house lane, as it connects with the Treebury pike a short distance away, Henny and I separately shouldered our bags of walnuts and started off in the opposite direction, soon coming within sight of the Bumblehopper farmhouse at the extreme east end of the long tree-bordered lane, where we stopped to get a drink.

And Mrs. Bumblehopper, of course, had a million questions to ask us about things on the adjoining farm. For she and Mrs. Bibbler are great friends. By road their homes are fully two miles apart. But by cutting across the intervening fields they can shorten the distance to half a mile, which explains why Henny and I had come this way instead of following Red and Rory down the Treebury pike.

"Ma hardly ever has dinner before twelve-thirty," said Henny, when we came within sight of his father's squatty cabin on the west bank of the creek. "So let's stop here for a minute or two."

Mr. Bibbler is a tall, big-boned man, kind of stooped like most old people and a bit uncertain on his long thin legs. He wears glasses for close work, but always looks over them when he talks to people. His eyes are a faded blue, a peculiar contrast to his coal-black hair. At times these eyes can spit fire. For he has a mean temper. Yet at other times they seem so wistful-like that you feel kind of sad as you look into them. Of the two, I like Henny's ma the best. But the old man is all right.

A warm smile flashed across his grizzled face when we tumbled into the kitchen where he was baking cookies.

"I was jest thinkin' of you boys," he told us. "For I know how you like cookies, Henny. And these are some of the best ones I've baked in months. . . . Lose that heifer that took sick on you last week?"

"No," said Henny, nibbling gingerly at one of the cookies. "Ma fixed up some medicine for it."

A cloud passed over the old man's face.

"Humph!" he grunted, kind of contemptuous-like. "The wonder is then that it didn't die."

"Yes," Henny shot back, "and the wonder is that you don't die eating junk like this."

"Heh?" the farmer bristled. "Don't you like my cookies?"

"They taste like sawdust flavored with wagon grease."

"Look a-here, young man," came severely, as the scowl deepened on the elderly face, "I'll take a stick to you if you git too sassy. The idea of you talkin' that way to your pa when he gives you good cookies to eat."

Henny put a hand to his jaw.

"Oh, oh," he groaned, pretending that he was in great pain. "I broke a tooth."

After which, of course, I expected the hot-tempered old man to blow up. And I got ready to run. But instead of lighting into Henny he rushed to the cook stove where the smoke from a batch of burned cookies was rolling out of the oven. And did he ever bellow when he burned his fingers on the oven door. In a way, it was funny.

"Serves you right," said Henny heartlessly. "I don't feel a bit sorry for you. For you don't have to do your own cooking."

"A husband has got his own personal rights," said Mr. Bibbler stubbornly. "And a marriage certificate doesn't take those rights away from him, nuther. He can dye his hair if he wants to with shoe blacking or any other kind of blacking."

"And a wife has her rights, too," said Henny. "If she wants to wear earrings it's nobody's business but her own."

"It's tarnation foolishness."

"That's what you say. And ma says your hair dye is tarnation foolishness. It's six of one and a half dozen of the other."

"Get out of here and don't sass me," the old man completely lost his temper. "And if your ma sent you here to say those things you jest tell her that my hair'll stay dyed as long as she acts like a barbarian and wears earrings. Get out, I tell you. And it's lucky for you, you young sass-box, that I don't warm you up good and proper."

Crossing the creek, Henny looked back at the squatty cabin.

"I didn't let on to him, Jerry, but every time I see ma doing his work around the farm I razz her the same as I razzed him. For I want to bring them together if I can and give the neighbors something else to talk about for a change. But pa in particular is as stubborn as a mule. Still, I like him a lot and he likes me. And the same is true of my ma. I've got a good pa and ma, with all of their faults. They just got started wrong on this thing. And I'd give a leg if I could get them straightened out. *Shoe blacking!* Gr-r-r-r!" and he socked a rock at the fence. *"Earrings!* Gr-r-r-r!" and he grabbed another rock.

A small, waspish, bright-eyed little old lady, Mrs. Bibbler works as hard as she talks. Her

house is as neat as wax. She keeps a beautiful yard, too, full of trimmed bushes and fancy-shaped flower beds. Henny cuts the grass twice a week in the summer time. His ma makes him trim around the trees, too. And one Saturday he and I stretched a woven-wire fence clear around the farmhouse, for it was his ma's complaint that the chickens were scratching up her choice flowers. Later Henny built a swinging gate in front, which now slammed behind us as we hurried up the path to the two-story farmhouse, a collie dog barking at our heels.

"Laws-a-me, Henny," the talkative parent flew to the kitchen door to meet us. "I was beginning to worry about you. I was for a fact. For I know how reckless boys are when it comes to climbing walnut trees. And the wonder to me is that more of them aren't brought home with broken ribs. But do you see what time it is? Just look at that clock. And I always go to town with the eggs on Saturday afternoon. You know that. I like to get an early start, too. For Saturday afternoon is the only chance I have all week long to find out what's going on in town."

"I stopped in to see pa," said Henny, pitching his cap at a hook.

"Humph!" the little old lady stiffened. "You didn't see much."

"He looks kind of peaked."

"Well. . . . Is it anybody's fault but his own?" came tartly.

"What would you do," said Henny, "if he got sick?"

"What would I do? Why, I'd do the same as he would if *I* got sick: I'd stay at home and mind my own business. He has his own friends. Let them take care of him."

I noticed, though, that she talked less than usual during the noonday meal. She seemed uneasy, too.

"Did—did your pa say it was his old stomach complaint?" she finally inquired, getting Henny's eye across the table.

"No."

"Well," she gave a nervous gesture, "what did he say?"

"Nothing about himself. He never does when he's sick. You know that, ma. But he sure looks bad."

"Goodness gracious! We mustn't let him die. I'll get some medicine after dinner and you can take it over to him. But don't you dare to hint to him that I sent it."

"Gee," Henny smacked. "These are bully good cookies. And pa always did like your cookies."

"Yes; I'll put some in a bag for him."

"You see how it is," said Henny, when we

were outside. "They think just as much of each other as ever."

"Then why don't they make up?"

"They're too stubborn."

"And you want me to help you bring them together?" I grinned.

He looked at me earnestly.

"Jerry, if we can do that I'll be the happiest kid in the world."

The teacher lost all patience with us the following Thursday. For this being Hallowe'en we couldn't keep our minds on our work. All we could think of was the fun that we were going to have that night.

In Dad's day the boys used to cut up some pretty wild capers on Hallowe'en. Lumber wagons were hung in trees. And small buildings were tipped over. Down our way, though, that kind of fun is a thing of the past. What we do, instead of wrecking stuff, is to dress up in all kinds of ridiculous costumes. A sort of street carnival. Even the old folks turn out with their horns and noise makers. Everybody has fun, with the band tooting and the mayor dressed up the most ridiculous of all. Starting at dusk, the carnival frequently lasts till midnight.

Henny had to stay after school that night. For the teacher caught him shooting paper airplanes across the room. Getting out at five

o'clock he hurried home to do his chores, later calling me up on the telephone to find out how I was progressing with my Hallowe'en suit, it having been agreed between us that we were to dress up like ghosts.

"Mother's putting the eyes in it now," I told him.

"Say, Jerry," he spoke eagerly, like the bully good pal that he is, "can't you come out to my house to-night and eat supper with me? Ma's going to bake johnnycake. And Mrs. Bumblehopper brought us over some new honey to-day."

"Um-yum-yum!" I smacked into the mouthpiece. For it's a fact there's nothing I like better than johnnycake and honey, especially the kind of johnnycake that Mrs. Bibbler makes.

"I'll meet you at the mill in twenty minutes," said Henny, who readily understood what my "Um-yum-yum!" meant. "For I've got to drive to town for a bag of calf feed."

Later he and I drove out of town lickety-cut, the bag of calf feed jouncing up and down in the back of the buggy. Coming to the farmhouse lane I jumped out and opened the gate, after which we clattered down a gravelly hill to the floor of the hollow where we rumbled across a bridge, later putting the horse away in its accustomed stall in the barn.

Mrs. Bibbler, of course, was as talkative as ever. But what interested me a whole lot more than her gab was the swell johnnycake that she brought out of the oven. Oh, baby! We sure did murder that johnnycake, covering it first with big gobs of country butter and then plastering on a layer of honey. I'd be ashamed to tell you how much I ate. For I don't want you to put me in Red Meyers' class. But this was a sort of special occasion. And all boys are entitled to fill up once in a while.

Staggering into the parlor, I entertained myself with the family album while Henny wiped the supper dishes for his ma, after which he joined me on the settee.

"Who's that?" I asked him, pointing to one of the old-fashioned pictures. "Your pa?"

"No. That's my Uncle Jonah. He and pa are twins. And except for their hair no one can tell them apart."

"He looks like a sailor," I further studied the odd picture.

"He is."

A sailor by the name of Jonah!

"Maybe he's the fellow," I laughed, recalling a recent Sunday-school lesson, "who swallowed the whale."

"You're getting things twisted, Jerry. It was the whale who swallowed Jonah. But not *this* Jonah."

Sailors are interesting. For usually they know a lot of peachy pirate stories. So I told Henny to let me know the next time his uncle came to town. For I wanted to meet him.

"I wish he would drop in on us. As a matter of fact, Jerry, I've never seen him. Nor has he written a line to pa in many years."

"Maybe he's dead."

"Ma thinks so. For one night she had a queer dream about him. But somehow I have the feeling that he's still alive."

"Is he married?"

"No."

"Rich?"

Henny laughed.

"Sailors usually aren't rich, Jerry. But let's pull out. What do you say? For I've got to stop at pa's house with a pail of milk."

"Yes," put in Mrs. Bibbler, "and I want you to take this quilt-block pattern over to Mrs. Bumblehopper. For she went off and forgot it. And I know that she needs it, as she works on her quilt every night."

We could cut across the fields in less time than it would take us to hitch up the horse, Henny said. So we lit it, intending to hoof it into town on the Treebury pike the same as Red and Rory had done the preceding Saturday noon.

There was a big round moon in the sky. A

regular Hallowe'en moon. So we had no trouble finding our way. Then, having delivered the quilt-block pattern to its appreciative owner, we hurried down the long lane, soon coming to the moonlit haunted house which looked spookier and lonelier than ever.

Haunted houses are all right in the daytime. But I can't say that I'm crazy over them at night, especially on Hallowe'en. Henny, though, thought it would be fun to stop and go through the old house. So what could I do but follow suit!

Tiptoeing across the yard to the window with the loose boards we crawled inside, our coat buttons scraping on the sill. And was it ever dark in there. Br-r-r!

"Hear anything?" Henny breathed softly in my ear.

"No."

"Let's yell," was his crazy suggestion.

"What for?"

"Oh, just for fun," he laughed.

"I'll yell, all right," I told him truthfully, "if anything comes scooting down that stairs."

There was a short silence then as we tiptoed from room to room, after which Henny told me things about the attic suicide that I never had heard before.

As sexton of the old Scotch cemetery he had gotten himself into trouble. For he was a

grave robber. One stormy night, following the burial of a rich man, people passing the cemetery had heard a voice screaming for help. Upon investigation they found that it was the sexton himself. Having exhumed the body of the rich man he had braced it against a tree to strip it of its fine coat. But the stiff arms, folded in place, had locked themselves around the robber's neck. And there he was, helpless with fear, caught like a rat in a trap. Later he was taken to his home where, as recorded, he had hung himself in the attic, thus cheating the law.

I didn't thank Henny for dishing out all these gruesome particulars to me. For if you must know the truth of the matter I had goose pimples on my legs as big as golf balls. At least they seemed that big to me. But I let on that I was as bold as brass. Gr-r-r-r! As though the ghost of any old grave-robber suicide could scare *me*.

"Well, have you seen enough?" I finally inquired.

"*Enough?*" he laughed. "I haven't seen anything yet."

I was standing near the open window. And suddenly my heart jumped into my throat. For I had caught sight of a tall, headless thing gliding vapory-like in and out among the moonlit bushes.

"Give . . . me . . . back . . . my . . . head!" it spoke in a deep, hollow voice, which filled my mind with pictures of tombs and open graves. "Give . . . me . . . back . . . my . . . head!"

I thought Henny's eyes would pop out of their sockets.

"Well, I'll be jiggered," he cried.

Then in the blink of an eye the ghost disappeared. One minute it was there in plain sight. The next minute it was gone. Slick and clean. Strangely, though, we could still hear its voice.

"Just as I thought," said Henny, scrambling through the window. "It isn't a real ghost at all; it's some one playing ghost. And whoever it is has stumbled into the old well."

"Help! Help!" screamed the ghost. "Get a rope and pull me out."

Leaning over the edge of the well, at the bottom of which we could detect a floundering white shape, Henny suddenly dug his fingers into my arm.

"It's pa," he cried, in an amazed voice. "He knew we were going to pass here to-night. For I told him so when I stopped there with the milk. And he came over here to have some fun with us. We've got to get a rope, Jerry. If we don't he'll drown."

I thought of the rope in the attic. But Henny said it was too short.

"Run home and get ma's clothesline," he told me.

So I lit out, lickety-cut—up the lane and across the moonlit fields. I never ran so fast in all my life. Pretty soon I came to the farmhouse, where I told Mrs. Bibbler that there was a ghost in the old well at the haunted house. She thought at first that I was crazy. But I got the needed clothesline. And when I lit out again she followed me.

Henny's pa was hanging to a grapevine when I got there with the rope, which, of course, was quickly doubled and dropped into the well. Then the three of us pulled with all our might. And never will I forget the amazed look on Mrs. Bibbler's face when she saw who the "ghost" was.

"Pa!" she cried. *"Pa!"*

The old man's spirit was completely broken.

"Yes, Martha," he whimpered, dropping his dripping face, "it's me. And I suppose you're satisfied now. For I can imagine what my hair looks like."

Mrs. Bibbler hid a smile.

"Pa," said she in a gentle voice, "your hair is *beautiful.*" Then as quick as a wink she loosened her earrings and chucked them into the well. "I never cared for them anyway," said she.

"Nor did I care a rap for the hair dye," the

old man admitted. "But I hated to give in."

"We've both acted like simpletons, pa."

Wrapped in a shawl, the old man stopped on the way to the Bumblehopper farmhouse when his sharp ears caught the sound of distant band music.

"What's that, ma?"

"Hallowe'en."

"Um . . . It's been a long time since you and I went to one of them celebrations. And if neighbor Bumblehopper will lend me some dry clothes I'm tempted to go to-night, late as it is. For somehow I feel as though *I* want to celebrate, too. Would you like to go with me, ma?"

"Sure thing," Henny spoke for his mother. And I wish you could have seen that kid's eyes. All I could think of was twin stars. "You take him to the farmhouse, ma," came the quick instructions, "and I'll get his Sunday clothes. I'll come back with the buggy, too. Then we'll all go to town and celebrate. Whoop-ee!"

CHAPTER III

UNCLE JONAH

The news spread quickly up and down Main Street that Mr. and Mrs. Bibbler were in the noisy throng, one with bare ears and the other with hair as red as a gasoline can. Friends of the old couple quickly hunted them up to congratulate them. And for a time it looked as though the celebration was going to turn into a reception. Later a picked group assembled at our house. And did they ever cut up. Some one coaxed Mr. Bibbler to dance a jig. So the minister very sensibly went out in the kitchen to help make sandwiches. Later the choir sang, "Put on your old gray bonnet," everybody joining in the chorus, which goes like this:

Put on your old gray bonnet
With the blue ribbons on it,
While I hitch old Dobbin to the shay.
Through the fields of clover
We'll drive on to Dover,
On our golden wedding day.

It was a big night. I'll always remember it. And later I helped Henny move his pa's things

to the farmhouse, after which the smaller place was closed up.

Then December came, with cold north winds and blinding snowstorms. The school kids got out their mittens, and those who had no mittens ran to school with their hands in their pockets. Weather like that gives a fellow pep. One morning the thermometer registered fifteen degrees below zero. And did I ever hate to crawl out of my warm bed. Br-r-r-r! Henny, though, had to get up at six o'clock the same as usual. That's the common lot of farm boys. For cows have to be milked twice a day, morning and night. And stock kept in the barn out of the cold has to be fed and watered.

I like December. I like the joy and happiness that comes with Christmas. I like to hear the church bells ringing on a cold crispy night, calling the kids to practice. I like to hear the crunching of snow and the merry jingle of sleigh bells. Holly wreaths and Christmas trees and store windows jammed full of toys! As Christmas approaches, with its promised entertainments and worship, people stop in front of lighted churches and listen to the practiced carols. Neighborhood squabbles are forgotten and frowns turn into smiles as again the old, old story of Bethlehem is brought to mind. Mysterious packages are tucked away in dresser drawers. Telephones ring oftener in

December, for letters bring glad tidings of coming family reunions, and the people getting these letters like to share their joy with their neighbors. The talk in kitchens is largely of turkeys and plum puddings. *That* is Christmas in a small town like ours. And I dare say it's much the same in the big cities. For people are the same the world over. And the joy of Christmas reaches everywhere.

Shoppers crowded the Tutter stores, the windows of which were filled to overflowing with toys of all kinds, ranging from five-cent rubber balls to thirty-dollar erector sets. In one window there was an electric train. And almost every night after school Henny and I used to stop and watch the train as it rumbled along its tin track, through a tunnel and past a depot. There were switches, too, worked from a control board. In fact, it was the most complete train outfit that I ever saw. And while I'm pretty big for that kind of stuff, I found myself wishing that I had one like it.

"Well, Jerry," a friendly voice spoke over my shoulder one afternoon as I stood with my nose flattened against the window, "have you written to Santa Claus, telling him that you want a train like that?"

It was Mr. Baldwin, the owner of the store.

"I'd be more likely to get it," I laughed, wanting him to know that I wasn't green on

the Santa Claus business, "if I did a little hinting to Dad."

Henny was standing beside me, as interested in the train as I was. And rubbing elbows with him was Pete Gordon. The Gordons are as poor as dirt. And Chet Gordon, Pete's younger brother, has a crooked leg. For a long time he used a home-made crutch. Then one of the church societies bought him a crutch that fitted him. The poor kid. Mrs. Gordon is a widow, Pete's pa having been killed in a tunnel explosion at the cement mill. She scrubs floors, and Pete lugs washings in a rickety coaster wagon with a broomstick handle. Last winter he wore my old red mackinaw, glad, I guess, that Mother saved it for him. On Christmas morning Dad sent me over there with a big pork roast. And Henny's ma generously contributed a bag of potatoes and two heads of cabbage. Of the six children in the Gordon family Pete is the oldest.

"And how about you, Peter?" Mr. Baldwin then turned to the poor boy. "Have you got your Christmas presents picked out yet?"

Gee! I felt queer and mean and sorry all in a heap when I saw the hurt look that came into Pete's eyes. He had hold of Chet's hand. And I could see his bare fingers tighten until Chet squirmed to free himself.

"I don't see anything here that's likely to

get into *my* stocking," Pete spoke slowly. "I'll be lucky," he added, "if I get some clothes." Following his eyes as he looked down at his worn shoes I could see bare toes. Mr. Baldwin made a funny sound in his throat and hurried into the store. A kind man, and good to kids, he was sorry that he had hurt Pete.

"I wish I was rich," said Henny, as we walked away from the attractive window.

"You and me both," I read his thoughts.

"I'd buy Pete Gordon that electric train."

"Yes, and I'd buy Chet something. Maybe a drum. For eight-year-old kids like drums."

"And I'd buy something for Pete's sisters," Henny went on, in his big-hearted way. "For girls like to get Christmas presents the same as boys."

I thought of the hard-working widow.

"I bet Mrs. Gordon won't get much," I told Henny soberly.

"She would, Jerry," he spoke quickly, "if I was rich. I'd buy Christmas presents for the Whipples, too, and for old Mrs. Doyle who lives in that shack by the brickyard. Oh, gee, Jerry!" he looked at me with wistful eyes. "I wish there was a sure-enough Santa Claus to look after such people. You and I can't do it. For we're just poor boys. But I think everybody is entitled to some happiness on Christmas day."

"Absolutely," I agreed.

"People who have a lot should share with those who have little or nothing. That's my idea. Certainly, if I had money I'd buy out Mr. Baldwin's store. Toys and everything. Then I'd round up Pete and all the other poor kids and I'd say: 'Pitch in, gang. It's all yours. Take something home to your parents, too. And don't overlook the candy and nuts.'"

Having brought some eggs to town that afternoon, Mrs. Bibbler was waiting for Henny at our house.

"Laws-a-me!" the old lady lit into my chum when he and I tumbled into the dining room where she and Mother were comparing dress patterns. "What a dirty face for a schoolboy to carry around. Don't they have any soap and water in this town? No, you needn't look in those bags for cookies. I didn't buy any. Nor bananas, either. But I have some good news for you, Henny," her face lit up. "Guess who's coming to live with us."

"I hope it's Santa Claus," said Henny, getting my eye.

"It's your Uncle Jonah. And having given him up for dead, you can imagine how surprised I was to get a letter from him. He'll be here the day after to-morrow. And it's his story that for more than twenty years he has been shipwrecked on a desert island."

Uncle Jonah!

"Whoop-ee!" Henny and I yelled together.

For it's a fact I was as eager to see the old seaman as my chum was, the more so when Mrs. Bibbler let us read the long interesting letter.

The afternoon Uncle Jonah arrived in Tutter Mr. and Mrs. Bibbler drove to town in their surrey, which is used only on important occasions such as funerals and picnics. Henny was there, too, all dressed up in his Sunday clothes. Pretty soon the train came in, the engine hissing like a sea serpent and the brake beams jangling. Down stepped a tall, lanky man. He had a black cane with a dog-head handle and carried a shabby telescope grip through a conspicuous hole of which dangled a dirty red sock. Introduced to him, I was amazed to see how closely he resembled his twin brother. They even had the same walk and the same stoop. But the newcomer's hair, as it showed beneath his worn, travel-stained cap, was as white as snow.

Henny's home thereafter had an added attraction for me. For it was fun to sit beside the crackling wood fire and listen to the old seaman's exciting stories of shipwrecks and journeys in foreign lands. One evening I asked him jokingly if he ever heard of the other man named Jonah who put on the big act with the whale. And what he told me was so character-

istic of his stories in general that I'm going to write it down for you.

"Why, sartin," said he, wagging his shaggy head, "I know about *him*. I ain't a-braggin' on it, Jerry, but I don't mind tellin' you that the Jonah you mean was my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather. He was swallowed by a whale, a great big feller with a mouth as big as Mammoth Cave, and it was all writ down as family history in the back part of our Bible, only Noah, a neighbor who frequently sat up all night with my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather playin' checkers, plumb furgot to take the Bible into the ark. So it was lost when the big flood come.

"My great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, I might say, was an awful adaptable man. Do you reckon that he was inconvenienced when he found himself inside the whale? Not by a jugful. He jest squinted around curious-like and says: 'Wa-al, now, this ain't sech a bad place to live in. Nice and dry and roomy.' And right then and thar he set up housekeepin', inside the whale, mind you, and he got married and brought his wife thar to live and they used the whale's right lung fur a bedroom and the left lung fur a sun-parlor. But my great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, who, like so many women, never was happy onless she was

sweepin' and dustin', made the mistake one day of scrubbin' too hard on the whale's ribs, little realizin', of course, how ticklish the old beast was. Wa-al, to make a long story short, he giggled and he giggled and he giggled. My, how he giggled. And the harder he giggled the harder my great-great-great-great-great-grandmother scrubbed. Fur she thought he liked it. In the end, though, he give a big gulp and up come my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather and my great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, who, after swimmin' one hundred and sixteen miles through a shark-infested ocean, finally landed on a desert isle, whar they founded the city of— Um . . . Now, what was the name of that city? I've plumb furgot."

"Chicago," supplied Henny, giving me a wink.

"No," the old man solemnly shook his head, "it wasn't Chicago. To-day the city lies in ruins. And only a few college purfessors know that there ever was sech a place."

"I know," cried Henny. "It was Babylon."

"Um . . . I believe you're right."

"Laws-a-me!" came from the other end of the room. "I can't say that I approve of the stories you tell, Jonah Bibbler. *Babylon* on a desert isle! It's a wonder you didn't make it Constantinople or Halifax. Imagine what

Jerry's folks would think of you if he were to repeat these crazy stories. I wish you'd make better use of your time."

"Quit scolding him," laughed Henny. "For we like his stories. Don't we, Jerry?"

"I'll tell the world," I cried.

Yes, sir-ee. Uncle Jonah was all right. Every time I saw him I liked him better. So, as you can imagine, it was a big shock to me when he later disappeared so mysteriously, and Henny after him.

CHAPTER IV

CHRISTMAS EVE

"JERRY," said Henny, the Saturday before Christmas, "I'm going to sell my dog to Buddy Higgins."

I stared at him.

"Sell Rex?" I cried. "Why, he's the smartest dog in town. You must be joking."

"No," he waggled earnestly, "I'm not joking. Buddy told me several months ago that he'd give me ten dollars for Rex any time I wanted to sell him."

It was then explained to me that the other needed Christmas money.

"Uncle Jonah's awfully good to me, Jerry. And he needs a winter cap. During the time that he was shipwrecked on the island he lost his savings in a bank failure. Which explains why he looks so tacky. For he hasn't got a dollar."

"And you're going to buy him a cap?"

"Sure thing. One of those big caps with fur flaps. Boy, I bet he'll be tickled. For yesterday when he and pa were sawing wood he frosted his ears."

"But I thought you loved Rex," my mind went back to his pet.

"I do love him. And I'll miss him like sixty. Don't imagine that I won't. But it's kind of necessary to sell him. If I don't, Uncle Jonah won't have a Christmas cap. And he needs a cap worse than I need a dog, even a smart collie like Rex. Besides, maybe Buddy will let me borrow him once in a while."

"Henny," I said, looking at him with warm eyes, "you're the best kid I ever knew."

And I meant it, too.

Rex whined sort of pleading-like when we turned him over to his new owner that afternoon. He seemed to suspect what was going on. And when we started off with Buddy's ten dollars you never heard such piteous yelps in all your life. I wanted to go back and call off the sale. But Henny gritted his teeth and hung onto the money, which isn't saying, though, that he didn't look back with misty eyes.

I helped him do his shopping. And the cap that we picked out for Uncle Jonah cost six dollars. A peachy cap, let me tell you—one of the best of its kind that they had in the store. And that isn't all that we bought for the old man. For Henny remembered that his uncle hadn't a necktie. So we picked out a red one with yellow stripes. It was beautiful. And so noticeable. Then we bought a pair of green

socks with purple tops and a handkerchief with the picture of a ship in one corner. When the bill was paid all we had left was twenty-five cents. So we did the rest of our shopping in a ten-cent store. But you can buy some beautiful statues for ten cents apiece. And Henny's ma is crazy over statues. So we picked out two, one for his ma and one for his pa, spending the remaining nickel for a package of cracker-jack.

The school always puts on a Christmas program. And Monday night the teacher had us stay and practice. I wish you could have been there. For Rory was scheduled to speak a piece. And it was the funniest thing I ever heard in all my life.

"Now, Rory," smiled the teacher, when it came his turn to recite, "remember what I tell you about your 'h's.' For there's no sense of you calling a 'house' a ' 'ouse.' Watch yourself. All right. Let's hear you begin."

And Rory began.

" 'Twas the night before Christmas
When all through the—the—the—"

"House," prompted the teacher.

"Gee!" Rory squirmed, realizing that we were snickering at him. "Hi can't say 'ouse."

"Say 'h.' "

"Haitch."

"No, not 'haitch.' 'H.' "

"Haitch," said Rory.

"I half believe that you do it on purpose," the teacher tried to be severe. "But go on with your piece."

And then Rory got an inspiration.

" 'Twas the night before Christmas
When all through the flat
The steam pipes were going,
Rat-a-tat-tat.
The stockings were—were—were—"

"Hung," prompted the teacher, hiding a smile.

But that wasn't the word Rory wanted.

"The stockings were pinned up
By the chimney with care,
In—in—in—"

"Hopes."

"In trust that St. Nicholas
Soon would be there."

And that is the way he spoke the long piece from beginning to end. There wasn't an "h" in it. Nor did the amused teacher stop him. For she's pretty good at Christmas time.

"I never realized before, Rory, that you possessed such a flexible vocabulary. I only hope

you'll do as well when we put on the regular program before the general assembly."

The following afternoon Rory brought down the whole school. And when our Sunday-school superintendent heard about it he arranged to have the recitation repeated that night at our Christmas-tree exercises. Later I walked home with Henny to keep him company, his pa and ma having been called out of town on the train to take care of a sick aunt.

I like Christmas best when there is snow on the ground. And this was one of the bulliest Christmas Eves I ever had known. Stars blinked at us from out of a blue-black sky. And the friendly old moon smiled at us as we socked each other with snowballs before going into the farmhouse. Gee! I wish you could have seen Happy Hollow as we saw it then. A more beautiful sight couldn't be imagined. For the new-fallen snow, as touched by the moonlight, was a blanket of diamonds.

Uncle Jonah was sitting beside the crackling wood fire with his feet on a stool and the house cat in his lap. And there on the table was a big pan of popcorn. Um-yum-yum! You should have seen us wade into it.

"I kind of thought it would taste good to you," the old man smiled at us in his kindly way. "And maybe Rex would like some, too," he added.

"Rex isn't here any more," Henny said quietly.

"Heh?" the old man stared. "Not here any more? What do you mean by that? Did your pa and ma take him with them?"

"No," Henny shook his head.

"Then whar is he?"

"I sold him."

"You mean you give him up fur keeps?"

"Yes."

"What was your idea in doin' that?"

"Oh," said Henny carelessly, "I needed a little spending money."

"Humph!" the old seaman scowled. "Boys have too much spending money."

When it came time to go to bed Henny brought out a pair of clean stockings and hung them over a chair by the fireplace, in which the log that had earlier blazed so cheerily had burned down to a bed of cherry-red coals.

"It's Christmas Eve," he explained, when the old man questioned him about the stockings. "And you better hang up yours, too, Uncle Jonah."

The latter gave a queer dry laugh.

"I guess as how I'm too old and too hard-b'iled to be remembered by Santy Claus."

But Henny wasn't to be put off. So finally the old man brought out a pair of clean socks, after which we all went upstairs to bed.

The clock struck eleven; then eleven-thirty.

"Jerry," Henny breathed in my ear.

"Yes."

"I guess it's safe for us to put on our Santa Claus act now. But watch your steps, old kid. And whatever you do don't sneeze on the stairs. For Uncle Jonah's ears are as sharp as a hawk's eyes."

"You mean 'awk," I giggled, thinking of Rory.

"Sh-h-h-h! Go easy now."

But the temptation to speak Rory's piece was more than I could resist.

" 'Twas the night before Christmas
When all through the 'ouse,
Not a creature was stirring—
Not even a mouse.
The stockings were 'ung
By the chimney with care,
In 'opes that St. Nicholas
Soon would be there."

"I'm sorry," said Henny, kind of sarcastic-like, "that I can't supply you with a brass band."

"Why?" I grinned. "Does Uncle Jonah like band music?"

"You big nut!"

Tiptoeing into the hall, we then crept down the carpeted stairs to the living room, where we

shoved two big red apples into the toes of Uncle Jonah's socks, after which we put the handkerchief in one sock and the red necktie in the other. The cap was hung on a chair post, and the new socks, which were put up in a fancy Christmas box, were stood in the seat of the chair.

"There," chuckled Henny. "I guess that takes care of everything. And won't he be surprised to-morrow morning. I hope I wake up in time to see the fun."

The stairs creaked behind us. And when we turned there stood Uncle Jonah in his long white nightshirt. Having heard us, he had tiptoed all the way down the stairs.

Without a word he hobbled across the room and picked up the fur cap. His rough hands trembled as he pulled out the flaps and felt of them. Ever so slowly he replaced the cap on the chair post and picked up the socks, after which he turned a pair of probing blue eyes on us.

"Whar'd you git these things?" he inquired gruffly.

"Bought 'em," said Henny.

"Did *you* buy 'em?—or was it your folks?"

"I bought 'em."

There was a moment's silence.

"And seein' as how my head ain't no thicker

'an a hickory stump, I calc'late that's why you up and sold Rex. Am I right?"

"Oh, I was kind of sick of him anyway."

But Uncle Jonah wasn't fooled.

"Don't you go stringin' me with no sech taffy as that," he bristled. "Fur I'm no fool, even if I do be an old hypocrite with reasons a-plenty right now fur bein' ashamed of myself. Mebbe you think I didn't see you mopin' around the house last Sunday like you was lost without your dog. I got eyes and I can see. Shiver my timbers! I got a notion to give you a good floggin' fur sellin' your dog to buy a present fur an old sinner like I be. Why did you do it?"

"Oh, because."

"Because why?"

"Because I like you, I guess."

"And you felt sorry fur me because I'm so all-fired poor and destitute, heh?"

"Maybe," said Henny.

"Yes; I suppose you think I'm poor as dirt and ain't got no money to buy caps fur myself. And you go and sell your dog!"

Here the old man picked up Henny's stockings and felt them over from top to toe.

"Narry a thing in 'em," he mumbled.

Then a quick change came over him. Dropping the stockings he shot a glance at the clock.

And when he spoke he showed by his voice that he meant business.

"Skin right up them stairs, you young scallawags, and jump into your duds. Make it snappy. Then git the horse out and hitch it to the cutter."

Henny was staring, thinking, I guess, that the old man had lost his mind.

"Git a move on you," came the sharp command, "or I'll help you along with my foot. We've got to go to town to-night. And when we git thar I'll show you young pirates how poor I be."

We didn't know what his idea was in starting for town at that time of night. But it was exciting. So I helped Henny hitch the horse to the cutter. Then Uncle Jonah came from the house with the new cap pulled down over his ears. He piled into the cutter and took the lines, Henny sitting on one side of him and me on the other.

Jingle-jingle-jingle went the sleigh bells, the cutter runners creaking in the lane as they cut through the snow to the gravel. But everything was lovely on the turnpike, for here the snow was packed hard. Very few people were abroad in the moonlit streets. For people for the most part like to be at home on Christmas Eve. And how beautiful were the lighted Christmas trees in the windows and terraces.

Heading for the business section, Uncle Jonah drew up in front of the Tutter Bazaar, which, of course, was closed for the night. But he seemed to know that the proprietor lived over the store, for he hobbled across the sidewalk and jabbed a push button.

"What's wanted down there?" Mr. Baldwin presently appeared at the head of the stairs.

"Come down and open up your store," commanded Uncle Jonah, in a deep bass voice.

"Not to-night, brother," said Mr. Baldwin wearily.

"Come down, I say," thundered Uncle Jonah, "or I'll bust in the front door."

Which, of course, brought the tired proprietor down the stairs on the jump. Uncle Jonah whispered something to him. And smiling, Mr. Baldwin got out his keys and unlocked the front door. The lights were turned on. And there on all sides of us were toys by the hundreds.

"Jest help yourselves," said Uncle Jonah, seating himself on a stool.

I felt Henny's fingers dig into my arm.

"Then it isn't true, Uncle Jonah, that you're poor?"

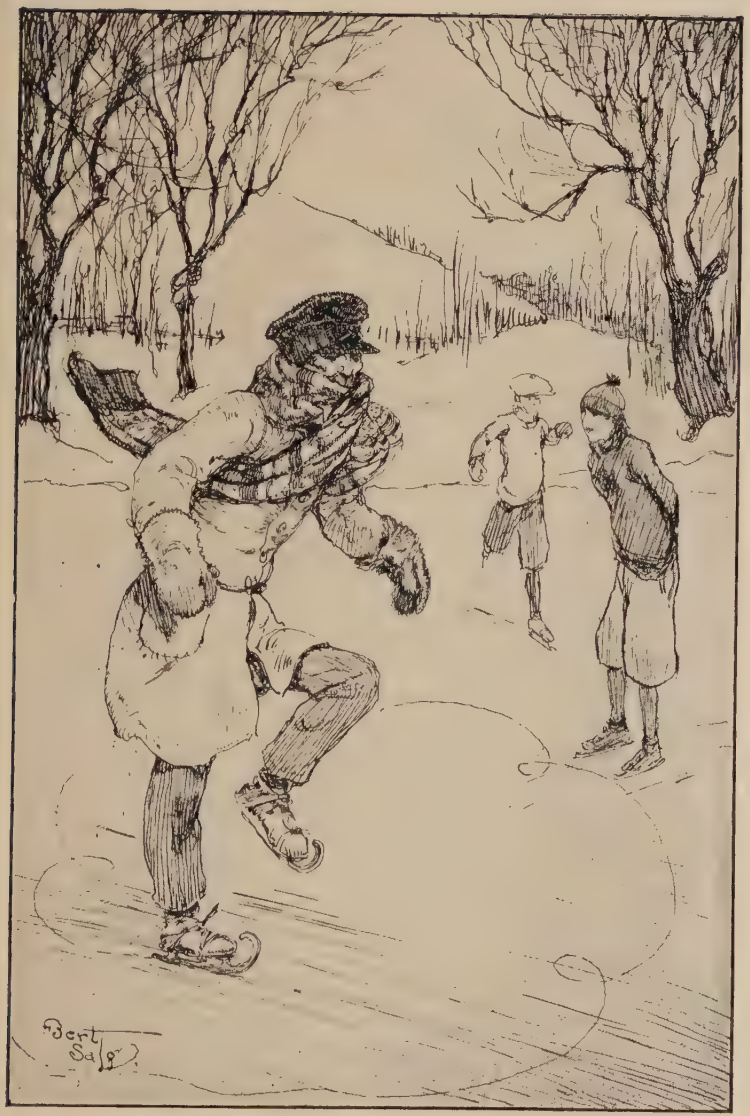
"*Poor?* Listen, Sonny—I've got more money than I can use up if I live to be a hundred years old."

"But you told us that you were poor."

"I know I did. I've been squeezin' onto my money like a miser, tellin' lies about bank failures to git people to support me without it costin' me nothin'. But after what's happened to-night I'm a-goin' to show some sense. Thar's a fine train of cars, boys. And if you want another like it jest whistle to Mr. Storekeeper and he'll trot it out fur you."

Well, wasn't that bully? There we were with a whole storeful of toys. I ran around like I was crazy, grabbing this and grabbing that. Then I stopped all of a sudden, ashamed of myself for being so piggish. And Henny stopped too. Like me he had a picture in his mind of Pete Gordon and all the other poor kids, who, in a few hours, would be looking into empty stockings. We put the toys back. And when Uncle Jonah learned why he thundered louder than ever. I saw then that he was roaring to hide his real feelings. Some people do that.

"Go back and git them toys," he ordered, "and git a lot of 'em." And you should have heard him as he stomped up and down the floor, thumping the boards with his cane. Then he came to a dead pause in front of a Santa Claus suit made of red cloth and trimmed with imitation white fur. "Jest what I need," he said, yanking the suit down. But before he put it on he gave the storekeeper a check for a hundred dollars, which we traded out.



I WAS SURPRISED WHEN I SAW THE FANCY STUFF HE COULD DO.

Then we piled into the cutter, loaded down with toys. Nor would Uncle Jonah use the robe, so anxious was he to show off his Santa Claus suit. I kind of had a hunch, as I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, that this was the happiest moment of his life. Certainly, it was one of the happiest moments of my life. And I pledged myself then to do more giving hereafter and less grabbing.

We drove down the street until we came to Pete Gordon's house.

"Santy Claus! Santy Claus!" yelled Uncle Jonah. And almost instantly six eager faces appeared in the front windows.

"Oh," cried Chet, with eyes as big as saucers. "It's Santy Claus. I can see him. And Jerry Todd and Henny Bibbler are riding around with him. Mamma! *Look!* They're coming to the door with a big package. Oh, goody, goody, goody!"

Our next stop was at Bill Whipple's house. And from there we went to Zulutown where poor Mrs. Doyle lives.

"May God bless ye," cried the excited little old lady, when we gave her cloth for a new dress. "An' would that the ould world held more like ye. Fur you've sure brought me great joy."

And then she kissed us!

"Ain't that thar bark kind of familiar?"

said Uncle Jonah, when we passed the big house where Buddy Higgins lives.

"It's Rex," said Henny. "They've got him tied in the garage."

"He's barkin' because he wants to go home," said Uncle Jonah. "On Christmas day every-'body ought to be home. Dogs included. So go git him. And to-morrow we'll come back and give the boy his money."

CHAPTER V

UNCLE JONAH'S CORK TREE

THE following week I skated up the winding creek to Henny Bibbler's house almost every day. And when my feet got cold Mrs. Bibbler told me to sit beside the cook stove and toast them in the oven. Nor did she complain when Henny and I dribbled water on the linoleum, as boys so often do when they thaw out after a wild tussle in the snow.

She was all wrapped up in Henny. Which, of course, was perfectly all right. But no boy cares to be hugged and petted all the time, especially in front of his chum. And at times, to her noticeable distress, I've seen Henny edge away from her. She seemed uneasy, too, when he and his father were together. I didn't think much about it at the time. But it all came back to me afterwards.

Mother told me Friday morning that I was eating at Henny's house too often. Mrs. Bibbler would get tired of cooking for me, she said. So I decided to stay at home that day. And when I failed to show up at the farmhouse

at the regular time Henny called me up on the telephone.

"Aren't you coming out to the farm to-day, Jerry?" he inquired eagerly.

"Not for dinner," I told him.

"Why not?"

"Oh! . . . Mother wants me to eat at home."

"I wish you would come out," his voice changed. "And the sooner the better. For I've got something to tell you."

"What's the matter?" I inquired quickly.

"I don't like to talk about it over the 'phone, Jerry. But get here just as soon as you can."

There's nothing tricky about Henny. So I knew he wasn't working me. He really needed me. Nor did Mother object when I grabbed my skates and lit out. For she realizes that boy chums owe a duty to each other.

Henny and Uncle Jonah came to meet me on their skates, the old man having resurrected a pair with curved runners. And was I ever surprised when I saw the fancy stuff that he could do. Boy, he had me beat seven ways for Sunday.

"It was on these selfsame skates," he declared, as he drew up in front of me with a fancy flourish, "that I made a trip clean to the north pole and back, which was the winter that our whalin' schooner got froze in the ice off the Labrador coast. There was me and an-

other man named Silligan, both good skaters, only he petered out after the first two hundred miles and had to go back. But I was bound and determined to satisfy myself that thar really was a pole up thar. Nor did I fail. Not only did I see the pole, but I climbed clean to the top of it, fillin' my pockets with bark on the way down, it bein' my thrifty intention to work up this bark into souvenirs later on.

"Headed fur home, and skimmin' along at seventy miles an hour, a nice easy pace fur me, I was attacked by man-eatin' walruses. They come at me from all sides, with wicked eyes and protrudin' front teeth. I don't know what give me the idea, but I started unloadin' my pockets. And every time I dropped a piece of bark they grabbed it, gobblin' it down like fresh beefsteak. Then a peculiar thing happened. They all began sneezin'. Which was proof to me that the north pole in reality was the trunk of a giant pepper tree. Their tongues burnin', the walruses made a rush fur open water. And unable to stop sneezin' while they cooled off their insides, they squirted so much water into each others' faces that they all drowned. That night they were froze in a cake of ice, on which I skated home, towin' the ice cake behind me. That walrus meat was the only food that me and my seamates had in the hul eleven months that we was marooned in the

ice floe. And what we didn't eat we traded to the Eskymooes fur reindeer skins, which later we sold in Boston harbor fur a bit under ten thousand dollars."

Standing behind his uncle, Henny put a finger to his lips as a signal for me to keep mum about our telephone talk, which mystified me more than ever.

"What do you think of my Uncle Jonah anyway?" he inquired, when the old man had returned to the farmhouse to thaw out.

"I think he's a wow."

"And you really like him?"

"Does a boy like pie?" I grinned.

"But he spills some awful lies. Half of the stuff he tells never happened. Take that cork-tree story of his. It's all made up."

"It's a good story," I defended.

"Of course. But it isn't true as he lets on."

"He does that for fun."

Henny did some hard thinking.

"I wish I could make myself believe that his mind isn't crooked like his stories."

I drew a deep breath.

"You had me scared," I admitted. "I thought it was something serious."

"It is," said Henny earnestly. "And I'm worried."

"About the cork tree?" I grinned.

"No. Uncle Jonah. For a man who tells

crooked stories very probably will do crooked things."

He was leading up to something. I saw that, all right. And I recalled then that he had been acting kind of odd for several days. I hadn't suspected, though, that he had a secret on his mind.

"Well?" I inquired, eager to get the details.

"He goes out nights."

"What of it? He isn't a prisoner."

"But he sneaks out. It started the day ma and pa got home from Aunt Kate's. We all went to bed as usual. But somehow my eyes wouldn't stay closed. I lay there thinking of the fun we had Christmas Eve. And I kind of wondered how much money Uncle Jonah really had. It got pretty late. Ten-eleven o'clock. A door creaked. Then I heard footfalls. I knew it was Uncle Jonah for he and I are the only ones sleeping above. He went down the stairs, but so gently that I had to strain my ears to hear him.

"Right after that I dropped off, later awakening when a floor board creaked outside of my door. It was Uncle Jonah returning to his room. The clock struck twice. I had been asleep for three hours. But I couldn't make myself believe that Uncle Jonah had been downstairs all that time. More probably, I concluded, he had gone down twice.

"Then the next night it happened again. I got up. And to my surprise he was nowhere in the house. Nor could I spot him in the moonlit yard. Getting into my clothes, I ran to the barn. But he wasn't there. Dressing, he had skinned out on some mysterious errand. I hid in the kitchen. And when he finally came in on tiptoes he had a saw under his arm."

This was fast developing into a sure-enough mystery.

"Did he know that you were watching him?" I inquired eagerly.

"No."

"But what was he doing with a saw at that time of night?"

Much as Henny trusted me it was hard for him to tell me the truth. For it hurt him, sensitive kid that he was.

"Other truck has come up missing in the neighborhood, Jerry—tools, jewelry and money. And I'm convinced that Uncle Jonah is a thief. For later that night he hid the saw under his mattress."

"Which doesn't prove, though, that he stole it."

"It had another man's name on it, Jerry."

"Oh, I see. And did you find anything else in his room?"

"No. And that's the puzzling part. Granting that he *is* the thief, as I suspect, where is he

hiding the stuff? I've searched high and low for it. But all I've found so far is the saw. Yet everybody around here knows that Mr. Gronke lost his gold watch. Mrs. Kelly lost her silverware, too."

"More than likely," I put in, as serious now as the other, "he's got the truck buried. So if you want me to, Henny, I'll stay here tonight and we'll watch. Then if he goes out we'll follow him."

"Thanks, Jerry."

Uncle Jonah usually helped with the evening chores. But disappearing directly after dinner, we saw nothing more of him until supper time.

"Well," joked Mr. Bibbler, who thinks that the sun rises and sets in his twin brother, "how are you and your cork tree getting along?"

Cork tree! Some of Uncle Jonah's peachiest stories were built around his imaginary cork tree. And though I had eyed him soberly upon his return I now found myself curiously attracted to him. Certainly, I concluded, he didn't look like a thief. He had a good look, in fact. And I was less suspicious of him now than I was puzzled.

"You never would believe it if I was to tell you how many ailments that pesky cork tree of mine can put on," said the old seaman, as he soaped his big nose, it being the plan in

Henny's home for everybody to clean up before supper. "It's jest as pernickety as some people. About the time I git it growin' straight and proper on the starboard side it starts gittin' humpy on the poop deck. Yes, sir, jest like it did the summer I was shipwrecked off the south-eastern coast of Borneo—only, I guess, it ain't quite so bad this time. But it's bad enough."

"I suppose," said Henny's pa, winking at me on the sly, "that it's a big convenience to a seafaring man to have a thrifty cork tree along when he gets shipwrecked."

"Yes, indeed," nodded Uncle Jonah solemnly. "A man never can tell when he's likely to be a-needin' a cork. And you can't have corks if you ain't got a cork tree. Um. . . . Lots of times I've been hard pressed fur a cork, and furgittin' about my tree I've said to myself: 'Now, if I only had a cork.' And then it would pop into my head how I had a cork tree and right off I'd go outside and look the tree over fur jest the very cork that I needed. You hear people in the cities talk about street keers and electric lights, tellin' how necessary these things be. But when a man who knows the sea is fixin' to get shipwrecked, does he care a rap about sech things? Not by a jugful. What he needs more than street keers and autymobiles is a nice friendly cork tree."

Here Mrs. Bibbler bustled to the wash-room door.

"Laws-a-me, Jonah Bibbler. Does it take you all night to wash your face and hands? Supper's been on the table for the past ten minutes. And if I've called you once I've called you a dozen times. So get a move on you. And you, too, Henny. For I don't want to be washin' dishes till midnight."

Usually a great talker during meals, Uncle Jonah had more to say to-night than usual.

"Yes, folks," he waggled solemnly, "I wouldn't be here to-night eatin' prune juice if it wasn't fur that trusty cork tree of mine. It was this way: A turrible typhoon come sweepin' down on us when we was in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Down went the ship with all hands aboard except me. I don't know how many hundred of miles I swam. Mebbe it was thousands. Lucky thing fur me I had my cork tree. In the heat of the day it kept me shaded from the tropical sun. And when I got tuckered from swimmin' it give me somethin' to rest on.

"Wa-al, after swimmin' several days and nights a yaller-tailed parrot come roostin' in the top branches of my cork tree, jest like the dove did that lit on the ark, so I knowed right off that I was gittin' close to land. But I didn't realize what an awful dangerous territory I

was in till I seed a man-eatin' shark come cuttin' through the water at me. Um. . . . I'm a purty quick thinker, I be, and in the wink of an eye I dodged behind my cork tree. Comin' on the tear, the old shark shet his eyes and opened wide his wicked jaws. Snap! And what do you know if he didn't bite a hunk right out of the tree trunk. I guess that's the first time he ever got a taste of cork. Mebbe he liked it. I don't know. Anyway, he kept comin' and comin', and every time his jaws went 'snap!' he got more cork. After a bit I noticed he was actin' queer. Two-thirds of him was out of water, and he didn't seem able to make himself go. Then I seed what was the matter. He had swallowed so much cork he was floatin' with his propeller in the air.

"Then along come another shark and *he* got filled up on cork and couldn't work *his* propellor in the water no more. Another come and still another. They all got in the same fix. When I finally got to land my old cork tree had jest two small corks left, and the bay was chockful of floatin' sharks. I counted seven hundred and forty-six, then I had to give up countin' because the air blast from all them whizzin' propellers got so strong that it blew the numbers out of my head before I could git them sot down. But I calc'late they was at least two thousand sharks in that school."

"Laws-a-me!" put in Mrs. Bibbler. "What awful truck for a grown-up man to tell. Here, take some more prunes and dry up."

"Were you a boy when this happened?" I inquired of Uncle Jonah, hopeful that I could start him off on another one of his peachy stories.

"Jest twenty-one," he answered solemnly.

"Then your cork tree must be nearly as old as you are," I grinned.

"It'll be fifty-eight," said he, "this comin' Tuesday."

Mrs. Bibbler chuckled.

"Your memory is so good at keeping track of dates, possibly you know without being told that to-morrow is *my* birthday."

The sheepish look that came into Uncle Jonah's weathered face brought another chuckle from his sister-in-law.

"I can see plainly enough that I need expect no present from you."

"Corks," came thoughtful-like, "is about the most usefullest birthday present one can receive. So to-morrow, Martha, I'll make it a p'int to shake you down a peck or two."

While we were eating, a neighbor stopped in to report the theft of a brand new harness.

"It's that pesky thief who's workin' the neighborhood," the farmer scowled. "We've got to git him, Bibbler."

"Absolutely," agreed Henny's pa. "And if necessary we'll use shotguns on him."

Uncle Jonah had his face buried in a hunk of bread.

"Got any idea who the thief is?" came the sly inquiry.

"No," the farmer shook his head.

"I never did have no time fur thieves," the bread eater saw fit to add. "And, to that p'int, how well I remember—"

"Oh, Jonah," Mrs. Bibbler cut in wearily. "Please don't tell any more of your lies. For what will the neighbors think of you?"

Later Henny and I went upstairs to bed. And we pretended to undress. But if you must know the truth we crawled into bed, shoes and all. Then we waited with sharpened ears.

CHAPTER VI

THE MYSTERY BEGINS

"Henny," I finally broke the silence that filled the farmhouse. "I don't feel right about this."

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"I hate to be spying on your Uncle Jonah. For I like him."

"So do I."

"All you have against him in the way of proof is that one saw that you found in his room. And he may have picked it up on the road."

"But where does he go?"

"Maybe he's got a sweetheart."

"Don't be simple, Jerry. Men don't go to see their sweethearts at midnight and stay until two o'clock in the morning."

"Well, I sure hope you're wrong in your suspicions."

"So do I. But the facts of the case are against him. In the first place, we know that he's an awful liar. And, as I told you this morning, people who tells lies, even in fun, are quite liable to do crooked things. Besides, his

appearance in the neighborhood marked the beginning of these various thefts. I'm surprised that some of the neighbors haven't thought about that."

"And is it your intention, Henny, to turn him over to the law in case he's guilty?"

"I suppose I should. The thought of it sickens me, though."

"But why does he steal?" I further inquired. "He told us himself that he's rich."

"Some people are born that way. The temptation to steal is too strong for them to resist."

"Do you know what I'd do if I were you, Henny?" I spoke after a moment or two.

"Tell me."

"I'd let him go, even if he is guilty. For he's an old man. He won't live much longer. And it's a shame for him to die in jail. Besides, if you give him a chance he may reform."

"But what are we going to do with the loot?"

"We can return it on the sly."

"Kind of risky."

"Shucks! No one will suspect us if we work in the dark. Or, if we're unable to separate the stuff, we can dump the whole mess in the sheriff's back yard."

Henny then spoke more fiercely.

"Listen, Jerry: You know that I love my Uncle Jonah. And you know that I'd give an

arm to help him. But if he *is* a thief, I don't want to live in the same house with him."

"At least, though," I persisted, "you can give him a chance to skin out."

Bang!

"What was that?" I breathed.

"A yardstick. I balanced it in front of our door. Uncle Jonah has been standing out there listening to us."

"Gee! Shall I get up and lock the door?"

"Sh-h-h-h! I can hear him going down the stairs."

We got up then and tiptoed to the door. Sure enough, the yardstick lay on the hall floor, proof in itself that the queer old man had stopped outside of our door to listen. But why? Did he suspect that we were watching him on the sly? It would seem so.

My knees were peculiarly wabbly as we opened the door at the foot of the stairs. For I half expected to get a biff on the head. But the kitchen was deserted.

Grabbing our caps and coats, we caught sight of Uncle Jonah as he disappeared behind the barn.

"He's going down the cow lane," said Henny, in a queer voice. "I didn't expect that. I thought he'd head for the turnpike."

"It looks to me," I said, "as though he's heading for the old Rumson house."

Henny caught his breath.

"I believe you're right, Jerry."

"Have you been over there lately?"

"No."

"Maybe that's where the loot is," I spoke excitedly.

The snow-covered roof and weathered walls of the lonely old house soon came into sight through the bare-limbed trees and bushes. And while we were watching, Uncle Jonah unlocked the back door and disappeared inside. A light sprang up, visible to us through the cracks in the window boards. And a few minutes later a wisp of white wood smoke arose from the old fireplace chimney.

Crossing the yard with fast-beating hearts, we put our eyes to one of the window cracks, thus learning that the bright light came from a gasoline lantern which hung over a littered carpenter bench. And beside the bench was a peculiar box-like thing on low wooden trestles.

"Probably something he stole," Henny breathed in my ear. "But what is it?"

Gosh!

"Do you mean to tell me," I shivered, "that you don't recognize it?"

"It looks like a long box."

"It's a coffin."

His fingers dug into my arm.

"A *coffin?*" he repeated. Then he did some

quick thinking. "Maybe it is," he added, plainly puzzled. "But where's the other stuff?"

Here some one coughed behind us. And I don't mind telling you that I screeched at the top of my voice. For the combination of a coffin in a haunted house was a bit too much for me. Nor did my heart thump any the less when I saw who was standing there. Uncle Jonah, mind you. Wise to the fact that we were spying on him, he had sneaked around the house to surprise us.

Strangely, though, he wasn't angry.

"Have you boys seen anything of my cork tree?" came the unexpected inquiry.

Henny was several seconds finding his voice.

"No," he shook his head.

"I've lost it," the old man drawled. "And though I've searched high and low I can't find the slightest trace of it."

Was he crazy? I began to think so. I was soon to learn, though, that this added cork-tree talk was just a crafty scheme of his to ditch us. For he didn't want us to see the secret coffin that he was building.

"It ought to be here," he looked around, still letting on to us that he was puzzled over the "disappearance" of his cork tree. "But it ain't. And havin' wore out my own eyes lookin' fur it, I calc'late you boys will have to

find it fur me." Here he pointed across the snow-blanketed fields in the direction of the farmhouse. "Start right off in that quarter," said he, in a sharper voice, "and *keep movin'*."

He meant business, all right, even though he spoke in an ordinary tone of voice. So we did the safe thing and lit out for home as tight as we could go.

"Are you going to tell your pa and ma about the coffin?" I inquired, when we were back in my chum's room.

"Not to-night, Jerry," he started to undress.

"I think you should," I shivered. "For it was just your size."

"But *is* it a coffin? I'm not so sure. For it was covered with a cloth."

"It certainly looked like a coffin to me," I told him, as I kicked off my shoes.

"We'll find out to-morrow morning, Jerry. And if you're right about it, I'll tell pa, as you suggest."

Looking back, I've tried many times to piece together the amazing things that happened in the farmhouse that night after Henny and I had gone to sleep. There was a scream that registered in my mind as part of a dream. Had I awakened then I would have heard Mrs. Bibbler sobbing in pain. As a matter of fact, I did partly awake. But I didn't fully realize

what was going on. Nor did the truth come out till long afterwards.

"What's the matter with ma?" Henny inquired the following morning, when we awoke to find the winter sunshine pouring into our room. "She usually calls me at six o'clock." Jumping into his clothes, he ran down the stairs. "Ma," he cried, evidently finding the kitchen deserted. "Ma. Where are you? Why didn't you call me?"

Later I found him in the cow stable squirting milk into a big pail.

"You'll have to get your own breakfast, Jerry," he told me, hurrying with his work. "For ma and pa were called away last night. According to their note they left here at two o'clock for Aunt Kate's house. She isn't expected to pull through this time."

"Are they driving?" I inquired, noticing that the horse was gone.

"Sure thing."

"But why didn't they go on the train, as before?"

"They figured that they could get there sooner with a horse and buggy. . . . Uncle Jonah up yet?"

"No."

"The big sleepy-head. Rout him out, Jerry. For I need him. Gee! Milking at eight o'clock

in the morning. If ma knew about it she'd have seven cat fits."

I thought it was kind of queer that Henny's parents should go off that way without awakening him. But as he seemed to think nothing of it I kept shut.

"I had a queer dream about your ma," I then told him.

"Yes?"

"She was sitting beside a coffin. And every time her eyes turned away a naked hand came out of the coffin and tried to grab her. Finally she dropped asleep. Then two naked hands came out of the coffin. I tried to yell to her, but couldn't. And then, just as the hands grabbed her, I sort of awoke."

Henny gave me a queer look.

"Did ma scream when the naked hands grabbed her?"

"*Scream?* I'll tell the world that she did."

Before starting breakfast, I ran upstairs and knocked on Uncle Jonah's door. But I got no answer. And when I peeked into the room I found that the bed hadn't been slept in. Seemingly the old seaman never had returned from the haunted house.

Here was added mystery. And as soon as the work was done in the barn Henny and I lit out across the fields. We saw wheel tracks in the haunted-house yard. And the back door

stood wide open. But the coffin was gone, as was also the work-bench. Peculiarly, too, the human skull had been taken down. And when we looked into the cellar we found that deep holes had been dug in the dirt floor. Something hidden there had been removed in haste.

"It looks to me," I told my chum, as we further studied the wheel tracks at the back door, "as though your uncle had grabbed his stuff and skinned out."

"But my folks have the only horse we own," said Henny, looking at me with puzzled eyes.

"And you're sure he didn't go with them?" I inquired.

"Here's ma's note. Read it for yourself."

"Be a good boy, Henny," the note read in part, "until I get home. And don't be afraid to ask Uncle Jonah to help you. I wound the kitchen clock. But you better put some water on my fern every morning. And just as soon as I can, I'll drop you a postal card."

Attracted to Uncle Jonah's bedroom, we found that he had stripped the closet and bureau drawers of his clothing. Which certainly was proof enough to us that he had skinned out. But how had he managed it when Henny's folks had the family horse? And where was he now?

Do *you* see the answer to the riddle? I didn't at the time. And least of all could I compre-

hend why the old seaman had secretly built a coffin.

Henny, I noticed, was peculiarly worried.

"Do you believe in dreams, Jerry?"

"No."

"I don't either, as a rule. It's queer, though, that you and I should dream practically the same thing. . . . Are you sure you weren't awake when ma screamed?"

"It was part of my dream," I declared.

"Well," he kind of heaved a sigh, "if it *is* a bad sign, let's hope that it applies to Aunt Kate instead of ma."

Throughout the day we half expected to get some word from Uncle Jonah. But the only time the telephone rang was when Mother called up to inquire if Mrs. Bibbler had adopted me. She seemed surprised when I told her that Henny and I were alone. It was then that I started the story that Mr. Bibbler's twin brother, having completed his visit, had gone back to sea. For neither Henny nor I could see any sense in telling the neighbors the truth about the old man's disgrace. Not that we were on his side. But we had my chum's parents to consider. Nor was it our intention to tell either of them any more than we had to.

Now that Uncle Jonah was gone, bad egg that he was, the thing for everybody to do, we agreed, was to forget him.

CHAPTER VII

HENNY'S DISAPPEARANCE

CALLED back to my books and paper wads by the Monday-morning school bell, I looked around for Henny. But he wasn't there.

"What's the big idea?" I inquired over the telephone that noon. "Have you decided to quituate?"

"I'm a farmer now, Jerry," he laughed.

"Meaning which?"

"I've got to stay at home for three days and run the farm. For I'm the only one here."

"Have you heard anything from your Uncle Jonah?" I then inquired eagerly.

"No. But I got a card from ma this morning. Aunt Kate died yesterday afternoon."

I thought of our dream about the coffin. But I didn't say anything. Anyway, considering what we had seen in the haunted house, there was nothing surprising about the dream. And to connect it up with the death of Henny's aunt was silly.

"They're going to have the funeral Wednesday afternoon," Henny told me. "So I don't look for ma and pa till late the following day."

"How far did they go?" I inquired.

"Two miles the other side of Mendoto."

"Boy, that was some drive."

"Only thirty miles."

"And they made the entire trip in an open buggy?"

"Sure thing. But you must remember, Jerry, that country people are used to that kind of stuff. . . . Anything happen in school this morning?"

"Red had to sit under the teacher's desk."

"For what reason?"

"Oh, as usual, she caught him stuffing his homely face with gumdrops."

"Did she say anything because I wasn't there?"

"No."

"Well, if she asks about me this afternoon tell her that my folks are away. But I expect to be back at my desk Thursday morning. So, if I don't see you before then, old kid, I'll stop in at your house on the way to school."

According to the dates that I later wrote down in my diary, Uncle Jonah skinned out on the third of January. Henny's aunt died on the fifth. The funeral took place on the eighth. And Henny himself disappeared on the ninth, which was the day that he returned to school.

"Um-yum-yum!" he smacked, when I skated up the creek with him that evening between four and five o'clock. "This is 'johnnycake' night at our house, as I reminded ma in a note that I left on the kitchen table this morning. So you better take a chance, Jerry, and eat supper with me."

"I'd love to, Henny," I sighed, sort of dramatic-like. "But I'm too dumb."

"What do you mean?" he regarded me curiously.

"Dad got up on his ear when he saw my last standings. He says I've got to do more home work hereafter. And this is the night that he helps me with my algebra between seven and eight o'clock."

But Henny was bound and determined to get me out there if he possibly could.

"The moon will be up at eight-thirty, Jerry," he spoke eagerly. "So if you want to come out then, for a little while, I'll have some popcorn balls ready for you."

It would be fun, I agreed, skating up the creek in the moonlight. So I told him I'd do it if Dad would let me. Then, as we came within sight of the farmhouse, around a bend in the willow-bordered creek, he gave a happy yip.

"Look, Jerry. There's a light in the kitchen. Oh, baby. I'm dead sure of johnnycake and honey now. So you better come in and call up

your pa. For there's always a chance, you know. Besides, ma will be glad to see you."

"You and your johnnycake and honey," I kind of pushed up my nose. "Poof! I hate it." After which I turned and headed for home as tight as I could go.

I was called away from my work that night to answer the telephone. And imagine my amazement when Mrs. Bibbler asked me, between hysterical sobs, if I had seen anything of Henny.

Later Dad and I piled into our car and drove to the farmhouse, where we were told the complete story of my chum's amazing disappearance.

His mother, it seems, had sent him to the spring to get a pail of water for supper. It was snowing. And when he didn't come back at the expected time, she went in search of him. His tracks in the new snow led straight toward the spring at the back of the house. But he never reached the spring, which was covered with ice several hours old when we took a look at it. Suddenly the tracks ended, Henny seemingly having walked off into space.

"But what made you think that he was at our house?" Dad inquired of the frantic farm woman, who, unwilling to be left alone in the farmhouse, had followed us to the spring.

"He's full of tricks, Mr. Todd. And I knew

if he *had* gone to town that Jerry would know about it. But I'm convinced that something terrible has happened to him. For a fortune teller told me one time that I'd never raise him. That was the gypsy who stole my silk petticoat off the line. Do you suppose he's been abducted, Mr. Todd? And he's got my best water pail, too."

The poor old lady. She was trembling like a leaf. Later she was put to bed under Mrs. Bumblehopper's neighborly care. Then they telephoned for Doc Leland, who discovered that the frail body was covered with bruises.

Mrs. Bumblehopper made no bones of telling the neighbors later on that Mrs. Bibbler had been beat up by her hot-tempered husband, who again was living alone in the little cabin on the creek bank, which explains why we saw nothing of him in the farmhouse that memorable night.

And these, in brief, are the known circumstances surrounding Henny's disappearance. It was the general opinion of the neighbors that he had witnessed the quarrel between his parents, a matter which they refused to discuss themselves. And some people said that shame drove him away from home. Others of a superstitious turn of mind declared that the spooks got him. I don't believe in spooks. And you can't make me believe that any boy as hungry

for johnnycake as Henny was, would have skinned out on an empty stomach. No, sir-ee. When he left the house that night, after a peep into the oven where the johnnycake was browning, he had no intention of disappearing, however much his parents' quarrel might have upset him. He ran into something in the path —something that didn't make tracks. And whatever that "something" was it yanked him out of sight as quick as scat.

The local newspaper made a big story of the strange disappearance. And people came from miles around to listen at the spring. For Mrs. Bibbler told the further amazing story that she frequently heard Henny's muffled voice in the air. When asked what he said, she couldn't give any words. She was dead sure, though, that it was his voice.

I've seen her walking up and down the path that he took that fatal night. Every step or two she'd stop and listen. One day she stayed out so long that she frosted her feet. She knew that there was some weird mystery surrounding Henny's disappearance. And she couldn't rest easy.

Suspected by his associates of having abducted his own son to spite his wife, and hence an object of neighborhood contempt, Mr. Bibbler rarely left his cabin. At night the yellow light of his kitchen lamp called attention to his

lonely home on the floor of the hollow. And occasionally he was seen in the dark with a market basket on his arm. Like Mrs. Bibbler, he seemed bent and broken.

Unable to draw any sensible connection between Uncle Jonah's mysterious coffin and Henny's disappearance (though I was convinced in my own mind that there *was* a connection between the two), I told the whole story in confidence to Bill Hadley, the Tutter marshal. Later Bill and I visited the haunted house. But the shavings that Henny and I had seen on the floor that night had been swept up and burned. The puzzled marshal spent considerable time in the icy cellar studying the holes in the dirt floor. But nothing had been left behind. Nor did the passing weeks bring any tidings of the missing pair.

So far in my story I've said very little about my older chums. And you may have gotten the idea that Henny had taken their place in my heart. But such was not the case. When I got ready to write this story I sought Scoop's advice. What should I do?—make it a "gang" story from the beginning, like my other books? Or lead up to Henny's disappearance as simply as possible? And the plan that I have followed is the one that the leader himself recommended.

"Go ahead and tell your readers about Henny," was the advice that Scoop gave me.

"Tell them about that silly quarrel between his pa and ma which ended at the haunted house on Hallowe'en. For Mr. Bibbler's red hair is an important part of the mystery. And put in those crazy stories that Uncle Jonah told you, especially the cork-tree story. Let the readers see for themselves what a crooked-minded old coot he really was. And don't overlook that supper-table talk about Mrs. Bibbler's birthday. As for Peg and I, instead of dragging us into your story by the heels, it'll be a better story, I think, if you leave us out of it until Bingo arrives."

Which is the part that I'm going to tell you about in my next chapter. Soon after that, though, I'll get back to the mystery. For it was through Red's elephant, as it later disappeared on the Bibbler farm in pattern of Henny, that the amazing truth came out.

CHAPTER VIII

RED'S BIRTHDAY PRESENT

A FEW days before his birthday in June Red Meyers received a telegram informing him that a present was being shipped to him from an animal store in Newark, New Jersey.

"But what makes you think it's a monkey?" I inquired, when he showed me the telegram.

"Because Uncle Don promised me a monkey."

"Well," I grinned, giving him a dig, "I suppose there's an advantage in having a pair of them in the family, even if one of them is freckled."

But a little thing like that, as coming from a friend, doesn't upset Red.

"Haw! haw! haw!" he boomed, in characteristic bass-drum style. "You're funny."

"Where are you going to keep it?" I inquired. "In the parlor?"

"I haven't decided yet. Maybe I'll keep it in my room and let it sleep with me."

"Oh, no, Red," I cried, in quick alarm. "For monkeys are lousy. Besides, think how awful it would be if you and the monkey got mixed

up. We might never be able to tell you apart, unless one of you scratched left-handed."

"In which case," he grinned, like the happy-go-lucky little squirt that he is, "it might be well for you and I to sort of decide on a secret signal. For instance I'll say 'peanuts' twice and 'gumdrops' three times. 'Peanuts, peanuts; gumdrops, gumdrops, gumdrops.' Like that—see? Then, in case of a mix-up, you'll know it's me."

"Why not get in a few bananas," I suggested liberally, "or a cocoanut or two?"

"*You* would pick out stuff that a monkey likes."

"Well, I'll remember the signal, Red. 'Peanuts, peanuts; gumdrops, gumdrops, gumdrops.' But don't pull any tricks on me, kid. I can stand you, if I don't have to look at you too often. But I draw the line on chumming around with a real monkey."

"Jerry, if you ever took a good look at yourself you'd quit razzing me about my red hair and freckles. For it's a fact, kid, if I had a face like yours I'd pull my hair down over it and make a new one on the back of my head."

"Shake," I grinned, shoving out my mitt. "We're even."

"Did you ever meet my Uncle Don?" he then inquired, as we started off down the street arm in arm.

"No."

"He's rich. He likes me, too. For I was named after him."

"Did he ever see you?" I inquired gently.

"Sure thing."

"Maybe that explains why he bought you a monkey."

"Kid," he strutted, "you can't offend me. For I've been insulted by people with brains."

"But if your uncle's as rich as you say," I kept up the fun, "why didn't you tell him to mail you a whole menagerie? Think how the Tutter kids would envy you if you had a nice gooey hippopotamus in the back yard, or a few boa constrictors."

"Haw! haw! haw!" he boomed again. "I'd rather have you, Jerry. But let's stop in and see Rory. For his ma always bakes cookies on Saturday morning."

Rory was tickled pink when he heard the good news about Red's birthday present.

"Hi bet hit his a monkey," he studied the telegram. "For the hinstructions are to feed hit a lot of bananas. And monkeys are crazy over bananas."

Red struck his freckled nose in the front door and sniffed.

"What's that good smell?" he inquired innocently.

"Cookies," said Rory. "Wait a minute and

Hi'll run to the kitchen and get you some."

As yet, Scoop and Peg had heard nothing about Red's monkey. So, when Rory came back with the promised cookies, we all lit out down the street.

"Do you know what Hi'd do if hit was my monkey?" said Rory.

"What?" Red gurgled, cookie crumbs dropping from the corners of his mouth.

"Hi'd get up a circus and make some money."

"Hot-dog!" cried Red. "That's a real suggestion."

"It won't be much of a circus," I told them, "with only one monkey."

"Well," the freckled one gave me a dose of the same kind of stuff that I had been handing him, "if you think we need two monkeys, nobody'll keep you out of the cage."

"Copy-cat!"

Which gave Rory another idea.

"Cats make fine hanimals," he enthused. "We can keep them in cages. And by trimming them hup a bit 'ere and there, they'll look helegant."

Here the Stricker gang came into sight. And when we saw that they were headed our way, we hid behind a billboard in a vacant lot.

Bid Stricker is no friend of ours. And particularly have I hated him since the afternoon

when he and Jimmy Stricker, his mean cousin, took me down at the swimming hole and rubbed box-car packing on my nose. Other members of the crummy gang, all from Zulutown, a tough section of the west side, beyond Dad's brickyard, are Hib and Chet Milden, brothers, and Jum Prater. It's generally conceded among the Tutter boys that Jum has the biggest mouth of any kid in town, which was the part of him that we aimed at that exciting night in Zulutown when we attacked Bid's warriors with rotten tomatoes, as described so "bloodily" in my recent book, *"Poppy Ott and the Tittering Totem."*

Peeping through a crack in the billboard, we saw the enemy slow up when they came to the vacant lot.

"Let's stop in front of this billboard and play mumbly-peg," suggested Chet, getting out his jackknife.

"Sure thing," seconded Jum. "It's nice and shady here."

So they all sat down within ten feet of us.

"Boy," Red breathed in my ear, "if only we had a basketful of rotten eggs, huh?"

"I know something a whole lot better than that," I snickered under my breath.

"Tell us," he breathed eagerly.

"Look up there," I pointed to the top of the billboard, where a colony of lively hornets had

built a big nest under one of the wooden braces.

"Gee! *Some* nest! If only we could climb up and poke it down."

"Sh-h-h-h! Don't talk so loud. They'll hear you."

There was a commotion on the other side of the billboard.

"You're a liar," blatted Jum. "I didn't either cheat."

"You did, too," bellowed Chet. "For I saw you. And if you do it again, I'll sock you."

"Pipe down, you guys," cautioned Bid, "or I'll sock the both of you. For Jerry Todd lives just around the corner. And we'd feel simple to have him creep up on us and paste us with his slingshot."

Hib gave a mean laugh.

"I guess he'd enjoy pasting you, all right after what you did to him at the swimming hole."

"Haw! haw! haw!" blatted Jum. "That was funny."

"He'll get worse than that," bragged Bid, "if he ever crosses my path again."

"Who stole my jackknife?" bellowed Chet.

"Pipe down, I tell you."

"I want my jackknife."

And did Bid ever sock him. Oh, baby. But that's the way they get along. And the won-

der to me is that they hang together as well as they do.

Rory then got his eyes on an old cane fishing pole that some kid had hidden behind the billboard.

"Look, gang," he drew our attention to the pole.

"Hot-dog!" cried Red.

Then, having knocked the nest down, we skinned out. Nor were we a moment too soon. For hornets are quick, let me tell you. And when anything happens to their nest they scoot in all directions, looking for human blood.

In this case they found it in front of the billboard.

"Holy mackerel!" bellowed Bid, jumping to his feet. "Look at the hornets."

"There's millions of 'em."

"Some one must have stirred 'em up."

"Ouch!" screamed Chet, grabbing the seat of his pants. Then, as another old lunker took a crack at him, he jumped seven feet high. After which the whole gang lit out down the street as tight as they could go. And did we ever give them the horselaugh when they passed us. For Bid's nose was as big as a baby balloon.

"You guys'll suffer for this," he screeched at us.

Scoop almost laughed his head off when we told him about Bid's big nose. Then, at the leader's suggestion, we all went over to the public library to study up on monkeys. Which, however, was wasted work. For three days later, when the anticipated birthday present arrived in a special car, it wasn't a monkey at all, but, more wonderful still, a young elephant the weight of which was given in the shipping bill at thirteen hundred pounds. Even Peg, who is one of the biggest boys in town for his age, couldn't see over its back. It was just the right size for us. And wanting to make friends with it, and show our appreciation, we scooted over to the fruit stand and bought a dozen bananas, which were eaten greedily, skins and all, the elephant squealing with pleasure as one banana quickly followed another into its mouth. Finding that a dozen wasn't enough, we went back for more. Then, to further prove our friendship, we went all over the elephant, patting it gently here and there, after which it would let us scratch its trunk and everything.

But how in the dickens were we going to get it out of the car? That was the big problem. For we didn't know how to talk to it. When you want a horse to go ahead you say "Gid-dap." But when we said "Gid-dap" to the elephant all it did was to open its mouth for more bananas.

"I tell you what we'll do," said Red, than whom there was no happier kid in the whole world. "I'll pull while you guys get behind and push."

But that didn't work at all. For the elephant got kind of stubborn. Up went its trunk. And the first thing poor Red knew he got a flop in the face that knocked him cuckoo.

"See the pretty stars," he murmured, when we helped him to a sitting position at the other end of the car.

"Never mind, kid," Peg spoke sympathetically. "You'll be all right in a minute or two."

"Feel of his neck," I suggested.

"Huh!" grunted Peg. "You can't break rubber."

The vacant look disappearing from his eyes, Red looked around in wonderment.

"I thought I was in heaven," he told us.

"Your elephant socked you with its trunk," Peg grinned.

"Instead of monkeys," Scoop put in, as the foggy one staggered to his feet, "we should have studied up on elephants. Then we'd know what to do."

"How about your uncle's telegram?" I inquired of Red. "Surely that ought to give us some pointers."

"Here it is," he handed the telegram to me, too dizzy to read it himself.

"Shipping birthday present from Newark, New Jersey, by express," I read aloud. "Hope your mother will let you keep it. Feed it lots of bananas and other fresh fruit. Name is Bingo. Sailing to-morrow for Europe. Will write from Paris."

"Nice old Bingo," said Peg, gingerly patting the elephant on the head. "Good old Bingo."

"Look at him," laughed Scoop. "He's begging for more bananas. He's even got you beat, Red, when it comes to eating."

"Make him sit up," I told the leader.

"Sit up, Bingo, if you want another banana."

"That's no way to talk to him," grinned Peg. "Here's the line you want to hand him: Come, Bingo. Sit up like a nice little boy and papa will give you a pretty nanny."

"Get out of my way, you big nut. I know how to do this. Up, Bingo. Come on now. No, you don't get this banana unless you sit up. Atta-boy! You know your stuff."

And as though it understood every word that we were saying to it, the elephant sat up just as slick as a button.

"Oh," cried Rory, "doesn't she look cute?"

"*She?*" said Scoop. "Where do you get that 'she' stuff?"

"Isn't she a she?"

"No," grinned the leader. "She's a he."

"But how do you know?" Rory seemed unconvinced.

"As though a she would be named Bingo!"

"She looks like a she to me."

"Quit calling her a she," cried Red. "For she isn't a she. She's a he, just as Scoop said."

And did Peg and I ever laugh.

"You're all crazier than groggy bedbugs," we told them.

But though it was generally agreed now that Bingo was a he, we still had to learn how to make him go ahead and back up. Nor did we get any helpful suggestions along that line from the express agent and his helpers, who were standing outside the car door laughing at us. Then the Stricker gang heaved into sight. And did Bid ever hoot when the elephant, in sitting down, mistook Rory for a stool. The poor kid. I thought his eyes would pop out of his head.

But Bingo was all right, just the same. And we were proud of him, even if the express agent and his gang did laugh at us. As for Bid, we knew, of course, that his laugh was all put on. Deep down in his heart he was green with envy.

Other kids came on the run, having heard what was going on in the freight yard. And when we told them about the big show that we were going to put on that afternoon in Red's barn, they all promised to be there.

The elephant seemed particularly attracted to Peg, who, in fooling around, took hold of one of the big fan-like ears, after which the animal followed us down the runway as willing as you please.

Then we set out for Red's house, anxious to get our pet home so that we could teach him more tricks. Peg could lead him any place now. Simple enough when we once knew how!

Afterwards we learned that this was the proper way of leading an elephant. They learn that the very first thing.

CHAPTER IX

A BUSY AFTERNOON

At Red's suggestion we went down School Street, for he wanted his Aunt Pansy, who runs "The Elite" beauty parlor, to see his new elephant.

But various and sundry things happened when we came within sight of Mr. Goldberg's fruit stand. Gee! From all appearances Bingo hadn't enjoyed a square meal since the day they lassoed him in the jungle. At first, when he stopped in front of the fruit stand, we tried to coax him to move on. But he was anchored as firmly as the Woolworth tower itself. So we took the hint and bought him some more bananas, only Red couldn't pay for them, having run out of money.

Mr. Goldberg had seventeen conniption fits when he saw the snaky trunk bore into a basket of carrots. So the only thing for us to do was to tell him to add the carrots to the other charge against Mr. Meyers. Before we got Bingo away from the fruit stand fifteen oranges and a peck of apples went on the bill. But we knew that Mr. Meyers wouldn't mind about the car-

rots and apples when he saw what a nice healthy elephant we had.

All along the street people stopped to rubber at us, which showed how much we were envied. Then, coming to the beauty parlor, we twitched Bingo's ear, as a signal for him to put on the brakes, yipping to Mrs. Biggle to come quick and see the new addition to her family. For being a widow (her husband fell in the river and never came up) she, too, lives at Red's house.

Coming to the door, the relative's eyes almost popped out of her head.

"An elephant!" she cried, kind of clutching her fat throat. "Good heavens! Where did you get that thing?"

"Uncle Don sent it to me," said Red proudly. "It's my birthday present."

"Take it away," screamed Mrs. Biggle hysterically. "It's chewing my rubber plant."

Scoop and I quickly rescued the potted plant and took it into the store, which was the proper place for it anyway. But I suppose she thinks that stuff like that spread around in front of her beauty parlor gives it class.

"I'm so happy," Red beamed at his aunt, "that I could kiss a cat."

"Yes," she kind of snapped back, "*you* would be."

"Nice old Bingo," said Red, letting the elephant wrap its trunk around his neck. "He loves me already, Aunt Pansy. See?"

"Oh, Donald!" screamed Mrs. Biggle, with horrified eyes. "Don't do that. The horrid thing might kill you."

"What'll you give me if I stick my head in his mouth?" Red grinned.

"You hadn't better," I told him quickly. "For he may think it's another carrot."

Mrs. Biggle was hanging weakly to an awning rope.

"Isn't he cunning, Aunt Pansy? We're going to teach him tricks, too. And maybe some time I'll let you ride him."

"I give up," the beauty-parlor expert spoke in a feeble voice. "You're too much for me, Donald Meyers. But what I can't tell you your mother will. An elephant! And I suppose," she turned weakly to one of her smiling clerks, "he'll insist on keeping it in the house."

"See?" Red told his aunt, when Bingo sat up and opened his mouth. "He knows that trick already. Haven't you got something to feed him, Aunt Pansy?"

"Oh! . . ." shuddered Mrs. Biggle, covering her fat face with jeweled hands. "Take the horrid creature away."

Here Bill Hadley heaved into sight.

"Jumpin' Judas priest!" he bellowed, his eyes popping in their sockets. "Whar'n blazes did you get that thing?"

"It's my birthday present," said Red.

"Wa-al, I'll be cow-kicked by a grasshopper. An ellyfunt. . . . Who bought it fur you, your pa?"

"No. My Uncle Don sent it to me."

"And you're really goin' to keep it?"

"Of course," Red looked at the marshal in great surprise. "Did you think I was just rehearsing?"

"Wa-al, you better move on," Bill ordered gruffly. "Fur you're holdin' up the traffic."

Which was true, all right. But instead of being grateful to us for collecting a crowd in front of her beauty parlor, Mrs. Biggle acted kind of embarrassed.

Having run out of bananas, we fed Bingo a pumpkin pie when we got him home, after which we took him to the barn where the crazy hens, at sight of him, flew over the chicken-yard fence. By the time we got them back in their yard, Bingo had eaten up all of their feed.

One side of the big barn had been made over into a garage, and the other side was a hen house. There was a box-stall in back, but Bingo was much too broad to go through the old stable door. So we put him into the garage, figuring that Mr. Meyers, who, in company

"I'LL PULL WHILE YOU GUYS GET BEHIND AND PUSH."

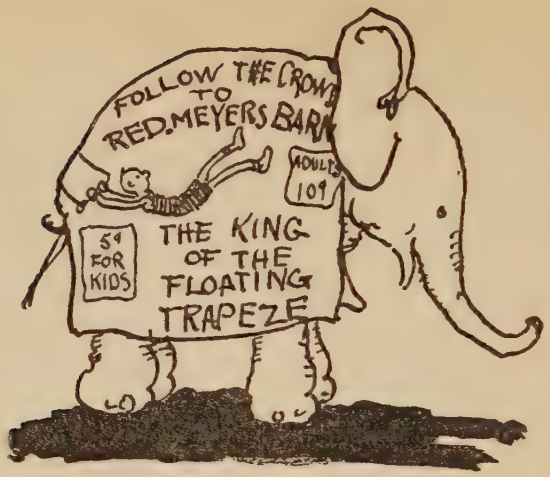
Jerry Todd and the Bob-Tailed Elephant. *Page* 91

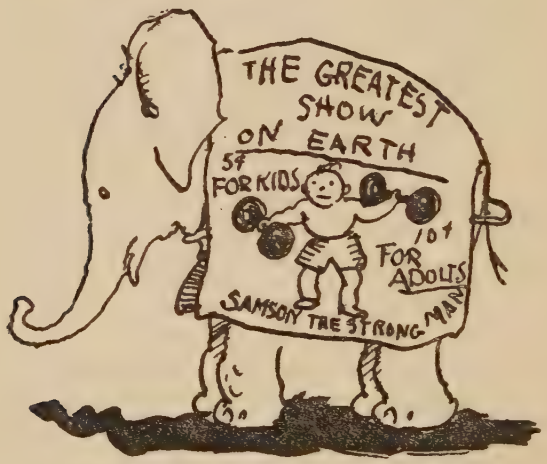
with Red's mother, was spending the day in Ashton, wouldn't mind parking his car in the alley until the stable door was made wider.

Scoop found some old hay in the loft. But instead of using it for a bed, as we intended, Bingo ate it. Which, of course, was perfectly all right. For we didn't want him to go hungry. And when the hay was all gone, we got out Red's lawn mower and cut some fresh grass for him. He liked the grass. So we hunted up another mower and cut a lot of grass, after which we got ready for our show.

If you have read my book, *"Jerry Todd and the Oak Island Treasure,"* which tells how we transformed an old clay scow of Dad's into a swell floating theater, you'll remember that Scoop was the magician. And having learned some new sleight-of-hand tricks, we now put him down on the program as the Great Kermann, the wizard of the ages. Peg was the strong man. As pictured in our advertising, he had muscles as big as pumpkins. Rory was the acrobat. He, too, was shown in our advertising. I was the clown. And Red was the ticket agent and general manager.

Hiring two kids to sweep the barn floor and lug chairs from the house, the rest of us put in our time practicing our separate acts and preparing the mentioned advertising, which consisted of two elephant banners. Here they are:


FOLLOW THE CROWD
TO
RED. MEYERS BARN
ADULTS
10¢
5¢
FOR
KIDS
THE KING
OF THE
FLOATING
TRAPEZE


THE GREATEST
SHOW
ON EARTH
5¢
FOR KIDS
10¢
FOR
ADULTS
SAMSON THE STRONG MAN

It was our intention to lead the elephant up and down Main Street at two o'clock. This would draw a crowd. And having found a suit of pink underwear that he could use for tights, it was agreed that Rory, as the acrobat, was to ride on Bingo's broad back. Nor did the elephant object in the least. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it.

As the strong man, all Peg needed was a pair of swimming trunks, the better to show off his muscles. Scoop still had his magician's outfit. And Red fixed me up swell with a masquerade suit of his pa's. All *he* needed, the general manager told us, as he shoved the ticket stand into place, was a black mustache and a checkered vest.

Rory hadn't forgotten about his suggestion that we make a menagerie of the neighborhood cats.

"Who's going to catch 'em?" he inquired.

"Catch what?" Red asked him.

"The cats."

"What cats?"

"Why, the cats for our menagerie."

"Don't talk silly," said Red.

"But we've got to 'ave hanimals," insisted Rory. "For whoever 'eard of a circus without hanimals?"

"Haven't we got an elephant?"

"*One* helephant," said Rory.

"He weighs as much as a thousand cats," said Red. "So dry up."

Mother asked me that noon if it was true that Red had an elephant.

"Sure thing," I told her, as I hurriedly washed myself for dinner.

"I heard about it over the telephone. But I could hardly credit my ears. Where in the world did he get it?"

"His Uncle Don sent it to him."

"An elephant! Good heavens! Is his mother going to let him keep it?"

I stared at her.

"Why, of course."

"Well, for mercy's sake, Jerry," she looked at me, kind of worried-like, "don't let it step on you."

"You want to come over to our show this afternoon," I told her, "and see what the elephant can do."

"Show?" she repeated, looking at me intently.

"We're going to put on a show in Red's barn."

"With his mother's consent?"

"Mrs. Meyers isn't home."

"Where is she?"

"In Ashton."

"Oh, dear! I wonder if I shouldn't telephone to her."

"Sure thing," I urged. "And tell her to hurry home in time for the show."

Mother gave a queer laugh.

"Jerry," said she, kind of slipping an arm around me, "you're funny."

Meeting at Red's house after dinner, we got into our suits and lined up for the big parade, Tommy Hegan having agreed to take charge of the ticket stand while we were away.

"Don't forget," said Red, sticking his black mustache into place (only he got it upside-down), "it's five cents for kids and ten cents for adults."

"Can I give a ticket to my little sister?" Tommy inquired eagerly.

"Sure thing," Red said generously. "But see that the other kids pay."

After which, Rory climbed onto the elephant's back and we started out.

"Ladies and gents," Red boomed at the head of the parade, having memorized a lot of stuff for the occasion. "We are about to begin our colossal afternoon performance. One of the greatest and most stupendous shows of all times. See the Great Kermann, the wizard supreme of the 20th century, who turns water into wine—get out of the way, you little brats, or you'll get stepped on—and makes flowers grow out of empty pots. See him. See him. See him. There he is, folks, just as he'll appear

on the stage this afternoon in our mammoth auditorium. And next in line you see Professor Abadullah Dardanella, the greatest fun-maker and laugh-creator of the civilized universe, who has appeared before all the crowned heads of Europe. There he is, folks. Then comes Samson, the strong man—for heaven's sake, Peg, pull up your tights!—who bends iron bars with his teeth and lifts weights weighing tons. Also we are featuring this afternoon the world's premier acrobat—the king of the floating trapeze. There he is, folks, riding majestically on our trained elephant, one of the many creatures of its kind, I might add, that will perform this afternoon for your edification and entertainment."

Don't think I'm bragging when I tell you that we stopped the traffic on Main Street. But we did. And Bill Hadley got kind of huffy about it, too. He told us to go home and put on our clothes. But Red was bound and determined to pass his aunt's beauty parlor. And when she saw us she fainted dead away. At least, she kind of fell over. Later she telephoned to Ashton, telling Red's mother to come home as quickly as she could.

Well, the show began. And the kids liked it, too. Of course, it was kind of embarrassing to Rory when he ripped his tights on a nail. But we soon got him pinned up all right. Peg's

act with the wooden weights, painted to look like iron, went over big, as did my clown act. But best of all was Bingo's part. Gee! The kids went crazy over him.

Altogether, we took in $3.45. And everything would have been lovely if Bid Stricker, after climbing into the hayloft, hadn't dropped a mouse on Bingo's back. Gosh! You never saw such wild prancing or heard such frightened squealing and trumpeting in all your life. The kids scattered like flies.

It was then that Red's parents drove into the yard and quickly got out of their car, both looking kind of wild-eyed.

"Oh, ma," Red ran to meet them. "I've got some good news for you. Uncle Don sent me an elephant. It's over there in the barn."

"Yes," Mrs. Meyers gave him a look that I can't describe, "I heard all about it over the telephone, though at first I thought your Aunt Pansy had lost her mind."

Mr. Meyers isn't the enthusiastic kind. We found that out when Red took his parents to the barn where Bingo was chewing holes in an old grass rug that we had laid down for him.

"My imported Japanese porch rug," cried Mrs. Meyers. "Just look at it." Then she got her eyes on our circus seats. "Donald Meyers, I could take a stick to you. Whatever possessed you to bring the parlor furniture out here?"

"We had to have seats. And see all the money we took in, ma. $3.45."

"Oh, dear! I might have known that something like this would happen if your father and I left you alone for ten minutes. You're the worst boy I ever heard of."

"Gee-miny crickets!" bellowed Red. "I haven't done anything."

Mrs. Meyers gave the elephant a look that showed plainly enough what she thought of it.

"I'm surprised," she told Red, "that your smart uncle didn't send you a whole menagerie."

"I wish he had."

"Yes," the other snapped back, "you better write to him and suggest it. I suppose he thinks this is funny."

Red was getting kind of huffy now.

"It was all right," he stormed, "when Uncle Don bought you a fur coat. But when he buys me something it's all wrong."

"An elephant!" Mrs. Meyers threw up her hands.

"Sure thing," Red stood his ground. "He knows what boys like. What do you think I wanted?—a pussy-cat?"

His mother came right out then and told him flat-footed that he couldn't keep the elephant. The thing to do, she said, backed by her husband, was to return it to Newark.

But Red has a will of his own. And determined not to be separated from his new pet, he asked us to meet him at the barn at nine o'clock. He and the elephant, he said, were going to run away, camping secretly along the country road. And he wanted us to help him get started.

CHAPTER X

IN HAPPY HOLLOW

Red was in the right. His parents had no business taking his elephant away from him. So I didn't blame him a bit for running away from home. And I hoped further that he'd have the backbone to stay away until his folks gave in and promised to build an elephant house in the back yard. Then, if Uncle Don's money held out, we'd get Bingo a wife, after which, of course, it would be only a matter of time before we had enough little boy and girl elephants to start a real circus.

I read in a book one time that elephants are the smartest animals in the world. They quickly learn to obey orders, yet, like some people, they occasionally get balky and do as they please. We knew, though, that Bingo never would act that way with us. For the book stated further that elephants were particularly loyal to people they loved. And Bingo had proved his love for us by eating out of our hands. In fact, he wanted to be eating out of our hands all the time . . . which reminded me

at the supper table to stuff my pockets with bananas.

Dad watched me quizzically.

"Evidently," he joked, "you're preparing yourself for a long and arduous journey."

"They're for Bingo," I told him.

"And how did you come out with your circus?" Mother inquired.

"Lovely," I told her. "We took in $3.45."

"Is it true, Jerry, that Rory Ringer rode through town in his sister's pink underwear?"

"I don't know whose underwear it was. But it certainly looked all right to me. For all acrobats wear tights."

"Well, I'm glad it wasn't you."

"I saw the parade," Dad smiled. "And for a minute or two I was tempted to borrow an umbrella for Peg Shaw."

"His trunks kept sliding down," I admitted.

"Goodness gracious!" said Mother. "What boys won't do if given the chance."

I suddenly thought of something.

"Say, Dad," I spoke excitedly, "will you buy Red's elephant for me if he'll sell it?"

You can see what my scheme was. If Dad would buy Bingo for me, Red wouldn't have to run away. And we'd still have our pet.

"What do you say, Mother?" Dad grinned across the table. "Would you like to have an elephant in the family?"

"Please, Mother," I got up and put my arms around her neck.

"Oh, Jerry! I don't know what to make of you. Don't you realize that an elephant isn't a practical pet? We have no place to keep it, even if we could afford to feed it."

"I'll find a place for it."

"No, Jerry. You can have a dog and a cat. But you simply *cannot* have an elephant."

Well, was my thought, it was better to have tried and failed (as the old saying goes) than never to have tried at all.

While we were eating supper, a fearful noise came from the direction of Red's house. Mother and Dad looked at each other, sort of puzzled-like. I suspected, though, that it was Bingo trumpeting impatiently for his supper. So, hurrying with my own food, I ran down the alley, learning that the elephant, at sight of another mouse, had knocked down the back of the barn. I hated to desert Red in his predicament. But after what his pa said, as he checked up on the damage, I thought I better mosey over to Scoop's house for awhile. Mr. Meyers never used to talk that way.

I was later invited to drive over to Ashton with Scoop's folks, Mr. Ellery having gotten a telegram advising that a relative of his was due to arrive in the county seat at nine-thirty. At any other time Scoop and I would have

jumped at the invitation, for his pa isn't afraid of burning out his brake-bands if we call his attention to a roadside "hot-dog" sign. But we couldn't go to-night, for we had important work to do.

Mr. Ellery's eastern cousin, I then learned from Scoop, was being sent to Tutter by some kind of a scientific clinic to systematically investigate the strange disappearance of Henny Bibbler, who, it will be remembered, had been missing now for more than four months. A prominent French scientist, in supporting his own pet theory about "air pockets," had recently published an astounding paper in which he maintained that anyone walking into such a "pocket" would instantly vanish. Scoop couldn't tell me very much about the foreigner's theory, for he didn't fully understand it. But I gathered that the American scientists thought that the Frenchman was talking through his hat. And as Henny Bibbler's widely known case seemed to bear out the "air-pocket" theory, Mr. Samuel McNair, who was something of a scientific detective, had been sent here to learn the truth.

Peg and Rory came along in time to join us in a noisy game of croquet. Then we lit out for Red's house at nine o'clock, as agreed, finding the freckled one, hammer in hand, putting the finishing touches on a box-like affair that

he explained proudly was to be strapped on the elephant's back.

"It's a howdah," said he, picking a sliver out of his nose. "I looked it up in the dictionary."

Well, that was all right. In fact, we thought it was pretty smart of him to think about it. When we came to lift the heavy thing into place, though, it got away from us, falling on the intended runaway, who was flattened out like a pop-eyed pancake. We had a hard time convincing him that we didn't do it on purpose, the more so when he caught us snickering behind his back. Later, when we were helping him get his stuff together, he brought out a bottle of liniment, asking us to rub it on his lame back. So we saw, all right, that his limp wasn't put on.

It was a race now to get him started before his folks got home, his pa, it seems, having gone for another ride in the country to cool off. The camping stuff came first: Two aluminum frying pans, six aluminum kettles of different sizes, two aluminum pie tins, one aluminum drinking cup, knives, forks and spoons, a rolling pin, three pounds of butter, a small sack of flour, a bag of salt, a teapot, an aluminum dish pan, six cans of sweet corn, two quarts of pickles, four loaves of bread, eight cans of peas, a potato masher, a combination can opener, a pail of lard, a peck of potatoes,

two pies, a dish of jello, a box of graham crackers, a boiled ham, a slab of bacon, a box of loaf sugar, six cans of baked beans, twelve cans of soup, a bottle of horse-radish, a can of baking powder, two cook books, three packages of raisins, a can of cocoa, a scout hatchet, a box of matches, a folding mattress, blankets, a pillow, a pail, a tub and a small tent with collapsible poles. The extras were two baseball bats, a catching glove, a slingshot, an air rifle, a pencil sharpener, a sack of marbles, two flashlights, a raincoat, a pair of rubber boots, a stamp album, three books by Horatio Alger, Jr., a tennis racket and a stuffed owl.

"There," puffed the runaway, walking around the pile of junk. "I guess that's all."

"How about the cook stove?" Peg wiped his sweaty face.

"And the piano?" Scoop swabbed in turn.

Here Rory staggered into sight on the back porch with the big hall clock.

"Take it back," ordered Red. "For I don't want to overload Bingo. Besides, I know how to tell time by the sun."

"What are you going to do?" inquired Scoop. "Charter a box-car?"

"Of course not."

"I thought maybe you were going to load this stuff into a car and then hitch Bingo on in front."

"Silly."

"But you can't get all this junk in your howdy-do."

"It isn't a howdy-do," Red corrected. "It's a howdah."

"You should have made it out of rubber."

"Why?"

"So it'll stretch."

"Listen, kid, I've got this all planned. I know where everything goes. So do as I tell you and shut up."

I discovered then that Bingo had helped himself to the bread, of which there was only one loaf left. But that was all right, Red said, throwing away a small cake of soap that had gotten into his supplies by mistake. Climbing into the howdah, on the outside of which hooks had been provided for the frying pans and kettles, he hung everything neatly in place, arranging the mattress in the form of a seat. When he got down near the equator, he said, he was going to sew a fringe on the tent and use it as a sort of canopy, like in pictures he had seen of the king of Siam out riding with his wives.

"Don't tell us," said Scoop, pretending that he was shocked, "that you're planning on starting a harem of your own."

"I'll have to do what the other men do."

"*Men!*" I put in.

"Sure thing."

"What are you going to do?—wear stilts?"

"It'll be many years, kid, before I return to this old burg."

"Anyway," grinned Scoop, "send us a picture of your harem, and we'll publish it in the Tutter newspaper."

Well, the runaway was all ready now. So we led Bingo out of the barn. And wanting to keep out of sight as much as possible, we went down the alley, Rory and I bringing up the rear, one with a flashlight and the other with a broom, as it was very necessary for us to cover up Bingo's telltale tracks. Otherwise, Red's folks would overtake him before he had gone a mile.

Pretty soon we came to the Treebury pike, which, as I say, runs up Happy Hollow past the Bibbler farm. And then, when everything was going lovely, and we were about to say good-by to the runaway and wish him good luck (with his harem and everything else), we discovered that Bingo's legs were beginning to bow out like a loose-jointed stepladder.

The elephant was acting queer in other ways, too. Examining him with our flashlights, we found that his eyes had a peculiar bleary look. Then, as he gulped sort of convulsive-like,

shaking all over, the frying pans and kettles shot noisily in all directions. Red, though, managed to stick to the ship.

"What happened?" he looked down at us with a pair of big eyes. "An earthquake?"

As though to answer for himself, Bingo gave the awfullest groan that I ever heard in all my life, after which he tried to lie down beside the road, where the bank sloped steeply to the creek (twenty feet below) and roll over. It came unexpectedly, giving poor Red no time to prepare himself. And the next we heard of the runaway was when he and the boiled ham landed kerplunk in the creek at the bottom of the hill. All the other truck rolled down the hill, too. So, as you can see, it was kind of unfortunate for our chum that he and the boiled ham got to the bottom first. For a can of peas, when given a fairly good start, can hit a fellow an awful wallop.

Red lived through it, though. For he's hard. And staggering up the hill, with a hunted look in his eyes and the patent can opener sticking out of his hair, he found us kneeling anxiously beside poor Bingo, whose insides were doing things they weren't supposed to do. We wondered, as we listened to the rumbling and gurgling, if the elephant hadn't eaten something that disagreed with him. Maybe it was the porch rug.

At Scoop's suggestion, I ran into town to get a doctor. But none of the doctors were available. So I stopped at the drug store, inquiring excitedly of Mr. Wheeler what he would prescribe for a boy who had eaten three dozen bananas, a bushel of carrots, fifteen oranges, a peck of apples, a pumpkin pie, a peck of chicken feed, four pieces of cake, eight cheese sandwiches, three loaves of bread and a Japanese porch rug? He thought I was crazy, I guess. For he told me to call up Main 33, which was the undertaking parlor. As Red was running away secretly, I couldn't very well explain to the druggist that my "boy" was a young elephant, so I made it a horse, getting a gallon of horse medicine, which, at my instructions, was charged to Mr. Meyers.

When I got back to Happy Hollow I learned that Bingo, too, in thrashing about, had rolled down the hill. But the shake-up seemed to have done the elephant good. For he was standing up. He had a sick look, though. So the question was whether to try and get him up the hill, or take him over to the Bibbler farm.

Red admitted to us then that he was scared to go home, for the canned goods that he had taken from the kitchen was stuff that his father had bought while in Ashton for a fishing trip. Moreover, his mother would give him fits, he said, when she found out that her choice alumi-

num frying pans were collecting bloodsuckers in the bottom of the Happy Hollow creek. So it was decided that we should go to Mrs. Bibbler's house and ask her to take the runaway in for a few days. In the meantime we'd doctor up Bingo with the horse medicine. We'd repair the broken howdah, too, and drag the creek for the boiled ham and other truck, preparatory to another secret get-away.

The Bibbler farm in Happy Hollow, as I probably should have mentioned before this, consists of about sixteen acres, lying between the sandstone cliffs on the east and the highway on the west. The creek from Clarks Falls threads its way through this land, bringing down a lot of silt in the springtime, which keeps the soil in fine shape for strawberries and garden truck.

Like the farmhouse beyond the creek, Mr. Bibbler's squatty cabin was wrapped in complete darkness, its owner seemingly having long since gone to bed. Yet I had the uneasy feeling, as we hurried across the creek bridge, that the farmer was watching us. Then, at sight of the somber sandstone cliffs, my thoughts turned to Henny, whose loss I still felt keenly. Good old pal! He certainly had thought a heap of me. I had other chums, but somehow they didn't take Henny's place. Could it be possible, I asked myself, that he indeed had been

carried off by an air pocket? Yet, what a crazy theory that was.

It was now nip-and-tuck to get Bingo under cover before he completely collapsed, for he was weaving around on his stubbed legs like a groggy street-car conductor. So we decided to go directly to the barn with him. Which was perfectly all right, however nervy it may sound to you to hear me tell it, for Mrs. Bibbler was still a good friend of mine, though it is to be admitted that I had seen very little of her since Henny's disappearance.

The cows tried to tear the barn down when they got a whiff of Bingo, who, I can't deny, did have a kind of queer smell. But that was nothing to worry about. He was a nice elephant, just the same. Certainly, I liked his smell better than I did that of the old cows. But to save the barn from being wrecked, we took Bingo into a detached carriage shed, making a soft bed for him of straw carried from an old stack in the adjoining pasture.

During this work Scoop curiously drew my attention to a hole in the leaning stack, which took my mind back to the day Henny and I had dug the "tunnel," cutting our way into the heart of the musty old stack with a pair of sheep shears. He was always building tunnels and secret huts. Don't get the crazy idea, though, from this mention of the straw-stack

tunnel, that the vanished one's body was hidden there out of sight, or anything like that. For all Peg found when he crawled into the tunnel was a dead cat and a nest of rotten eggs.

Bingo was now lying flat on his back with his feet in the air. And the small eyes piteously sought ours, as though begging us to do something for him. So we quickly measured out a dose of the horse medicine in an old salmon can. But instead of swallowing the medicine, as we intended, he first tried to strangle on it, after which he coughed the nasty stuff all over us. I don't know what it was. But Peg, who got the most of it in the face, declares to this day that it was concentrated essence of decayed onions fried in skunk grease.

If only we had a hot-water bottle, Scoop said! I remembered then that on my earlier trip to town I had seen a huge red water bottle hanging in the drug store. It was an advertisement. But if it would work it was just the thing we needed. For Bingo's aching stomach, of course, was much too big for an ordinary water bottle.

So again I lit out for town. And when I came to the creek, there was Mr. Bibbler standing in the middle of the bridge with a market basket on his arm. I shouldn't have been afraid of him. But I was. And unwilling to pass him on the bridge, I ducked into the willows. A moment later he passed my hiding place. And as

though he knew that I was there, he gave a peculiar throaty chuckle. Then I heard him go into his cabin and lock the door. But when I looked back, the windows were in darkness. And again I had that uneasy feeling that he was secretly watching me. Was it true, as the neighbors said, that he roamed the hollow nights with an empty market basket on his arm? If so, why? Was he crazy?

Mr. Wheeler bent over and anxiously searched my face when I told him that I wanted to buy the big water bottle for my sick horse. Then he slowly shook his head.

"Jerry," came the kindly advice, "I think you better run home and go to bed. What you need, to clear up your mind, is a good night's sleep."

He thought I was cuckoo. And, to that point, as I told him desperately, I would be cuckoo if he didn't help me out. So, still shaking his head, he took down the big rubber bottle, and telling him to charge it to Mr. Meyers, I lit out again for Happy Hollow, finding Peg tending a fire in the willows beside the creek, where he had turned Red's tub into a water heater. Filling the big rubber bottle, which was almost as tall as we were, we then put out the fire and lugged the bottle to the carriage shed, where Bingo was still lying feet uppermost. I'm sure he knew that we were trying to save his life,

for he sighed sort of contented-like as we swung the big bottle into place on his stomach. He stopped groaning almost instantly. The inside sounds stopped, too. And pretty soon he fell asleep.

Leaving the others in charge of the sleeping patient, Red and I started for the farmhouse. Passing through a gate into the small house yard, so bright with flowers at this time of the year, and so reminiscent of Henny, I felt something strike my legs lightly just below the knees. Investigating, I discovered that I had broken a string that Mrs. Bibbler had peculiarly tied between the gateposts. Was this a scheme of hers, I wondered, to tell if prowlers came around her house at night? I went to the front gate, finding a similar unbroken string. And following it, I saw that one end led to the house.

A light had appeared behind the drawn shades, thus proving to me that the old lady had been warned of our presence in the yard. So, to shorten her probable fright, I motioned to Red and we went directly to the kitchen door, where again, as I looked down the moonlit path leading to the spring at the base of the sandstone cliffs—the path that Henny had followed that fatal night—I was strangely reminded of my missing chum.

CHAPTER XI

RED FINDS A REFUGE

We learned later on that Mrs. Bibbler's "burglar alarm" was a bag of dried beans hung over a tin pan beside her bed. When either connected gate string was broken, the beans showered into the pan, thus awakening her.

The mysterious neighborhood thefts, of course, had ended with Uncle Jonah's sudden disappearance. But having failed to associate the visiting seaman with the various local robberies, the farmers were still on their guard, Mrs. Bibbler among them, as her "burglar alarm" proved. Little did she dream, though, that the robber was her own brother-in-law. For Henny had sworn me to secrecy. And I, in turn, had done the same with Dad and Bill Hadley. Which isn't saying, though, that Bill hadn't put out a police net for the old seaman, whose description had been broadcasted throughout the state. If caught, he would have been thrown into jail and properly dealt with. But until he was caught, if ever, it was Bill's intention to spare the Bibbler family further disgrace. Not that he had any respect or sym-

pathy for the old farmer himself, known wife beater that he was. But everybody respected and sympathized with Mrs. Bibbler.

Naturally timid, and now left alone in the big farmhouse, the nighttime, no doubt, was a source of great terror to her. And though the doors and windows were securely bolted, she probably couldn't dismiss the shaky feeling that some night she would awaken to find the feared robber in her room. So, as best she could, she had protected herself against possible surprises, the "bean-bag" alarm warning her the moment anybody entered the house yard.

It certainly was a shame, I thought, as I rapped on the kitchen door, that she and her husband couldn't live together without quarreling. For they needed each other. And what a discredit to them that their final quarrel had occurred so soon after the death of Mrs. Bibbler's sister. Still, in a way I couldn't blame Henny's mother. For there *was* something queer and unnatural about that hot-tempered husband of hers. He lacked reason. And while I couldn't make myself believe that he had killed Henny outright, in some unknown way, I still had the feeling that he knew more about my chum's disappearance than anybody else.

And why was it that Mrs. Bibbler, so talka-

tive on all other subjects, refused to say one word about their final quarrel? It was her smooth story that instead of being beaten by her angry husband, she had fallen down the cellar stairs. And certainly, if she had suspected him of putting Henny out of the way, she would have turned on him like a wildcat. Instead, she tried to protect him, even lying about her bruises. Nor had she said a word against him in all the weeks since Henny had disappeared. The two of them worked together in the big strawberry patch. And when the berries were sold they split the money between them. It isn't surprising that the observing neighbors watched and wondered.

Having spotted us, as we scooted past her moonlit bedroom window, the lively little old lady got to the kitchen door almost as soon as we did.

"Land of Goshen!" she cried, staring at us. "What are you boys doing here at this time of night? Don't you know that my strawberries are ripe? And don't you know, too, that people who raise strawberries for a living have to start picking at four o'clock in the morning? I get little enough rest as it is without being routed out this way. Has anything happened?" she wound up, kind of anxious-like.

I smiled in spite of myself, not at her galloping talk (I was used to that) but at her odd

appearance. For she had on a long white nightgown, ruffled at the top and bottom. And her hair stuck up in funny little knobs all over her head.

"Do you recognize this other boy, Mrs. Bibbler?" I then inquired, directing her attention to Red, who was standing behind me.

"Of course," came the quick reply. "But why don't you tell me what you want? Laws-a-me! Don't you see how nervous I am? I'm trembling like a leaf."

And I knew why, too. She was afraid that we had brought her some bad news about Henny.

Told, instead, that we had a sick elephant in her carriage shed, she stared at us as though she could hardly believe her ears. Then her face saddened.

"Oh," she cried, "if only Henny was here to help you. He'd enjoy it so much. For he loved elephants. You probably remember the time, Jerry, when he rode one in a circus parade. And him only eleven years old, mind you. I was scared out of my wits when I saw him go by. A mite of a boy like him perched on that huge beast! But the elephant never harmed him in the least."

"Of course not," I put in quickly, wanting her to feel safe. "Elephants are smart. They only harm people who are mean to them."

"How big is your elephant?" she then inquired.

Red measured with his hands.

"I declare! Imagine a boy having a pet like that. And you say your uncle sent it to you for a birthday present?"

"Sure thing. But my folks hate it. And when it did a little damage at our house tonight—the old barn was ready to fall over, anyway—pa got up on his ear and told me that he was going to send it back to Newark."

"But what made it sick?" inquired the farm woman, when further informed on the situation.

"It ate too many bananas, I guess. Anyway, it collapsed on the turnpike. And this being the nearest place, we brought it here."

"And is it your intention to hide here till to-morrow night?"

"I want to, Mrs. Bibbler, if you'll let me."

"But what will your parents say, Donald? I certainly don't want to interfere with their family affairs. And they'd have just cause for anger if it came out later on that I had helped you get away."

"Please, Mrs. Bibbler," he begged—and believe me he's a good one at it, too. "I don't want to lose my elephant. It's the only one I ever owned. And in sending it to me, Uncle Don expected me to keep it and have fun with it. As for my folks getting sore at you, they

needn't even know that I was here over night if you keep still about it. For I'm going clean down to South America. And the chances are they'll never see me again."

A peculiar smile crossed Mrs. Bibbler's face.

"Laws-a-me! As though you could get away that easy with an elephant."

"But Bingo and I are going to travel at night."

"Well," she finally gave in, "I'll help you all I can, Donald. For I can't forget how my own Henny loved elephants. To that point, he was fond of camels, too, though, as I've told him a hundred times, the smell of them was enough for me. Oof! The nasty things. But it's all right for you boys to keep your elephant here over night, providing you take care of it yourself and don't let it frighten my cows or break down any fences. As for you, Donald, you can help me in the strawberry patch tomorrow and thus earn your board and keep. It will be kind of pleasant, I imagine, to have a boy in the house again. My poor Henny! You can't imagine how I miss him. For now I have no one to talk to. And I *do* love to talk, as I'm not ashamed to admit."

"Then you shouldn't have quarreled with your husband," Red blurted out.

Mrs. Bibbler stiffened.

"If you expect to stay here, Donald Meyers,

be mighty careful that you make no further remarks like that. For the trouble that arose between Mr. Bibbler and myself, leading to our final separation, is nobody's business but our own."

It's hard, though, to shut Red up. For he has more crust than a baker.

"Did you quarrel over Henny, Mrs. Bibbler?" he inquired nosily.

I thought for a moment that she would order him out of the house and slam the door in his face. For at times her temper is almost as fiery as her husband's. But she quickly got herself in hand.

"No," said she, in a peculiarly steady voice, "we didn't quarrel over Henny. Why should we? For a better son never lived. And loving us both, do you suppose that either of us wanted him to take sides against the other? Not at all."

"But what made him run away?"

"How do you know that he did run away?"

"People say he did."

"People say a lot of things, Donald, that might better be left unsaid. You may have heard, too, that Mr. Bibbler whipped me the day we came home from my sister's funeral. But such is *not* the case."

"You've certainly got your nerve," I flew at the nosey runaway, when the old lady disap-

peared into her bedroom to get him a nightshirt, it having been agreed that he was to sleep in the farmhouse. "The idea of you asking her if Henny was the cause of their family quarrel! I felt like socking you."

"Yes, you would pick on a physical wreck," he staggered across the room.

"What's the matter now?" I grunted.

"Honest, Jerry," he hugged his suffering stomach, "I'm so hungry I could eat a baked cat."

"Hungry?" Mrs. Bibbler picked up the word, as she came briskly into the kitchen. "Laws-a-me! There's no need of anybody being hungry in this house. Would you like a glass of milk and some cookies? Or shall I get you a dish of strawberries and cream?"

The forlorn look instantly vanished from the freckled one's face.

"How about both?" he grinned impishly.

And he got them, too—the big pig. But however much my own mouth watered, it never occurred to Mrs. Bibbler to ask me to sit up to the table.

"If Henny's nightshirt is too big for you, Donald," she ran along, in her talkative way, "I'll take a tuck in it. I warn you, though, to jump out of bed the moment you're called, or else you'll get a cup of cold water, the same as

HE STOPPED GROANING ALMOST INSTANTLY.

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he did. For it's the rule in this house that whoever eats here has got to work."

"Boy," Red rolled his eyes, "these strawberries sure are wonderful. It's too bad, Jerry, that you didn't get some."

Yes, wasn't it!

"Goodness gracious!" Mrs. Bibbler started off again, as the clock struck. "Do you boys see what time it is? Come, Donald, let me show you to your room. Henny always slept on feathers the year around, just like me. But if you think the feather tick will be too warm for you, I can easily change it."

"You needn't worry about me, Mrs. Bibbler," yawned the star boarder. "For I'm tired enough to sleep anywhere."

"Before you undress, though, I want you to wash your face and hands. For a dirtier boy I never saw in all my life. And I'd hate to think what the sheets would be like to-morrow morning if you went to bed in that condition."

Red loves soap and water!

"Gee-miny crickets! You must remember that I rolled down hill. And I'm all black and blue, too. See, Mrs. Bibbler?"

"I see more dirt than anything else. So get busy."

"Sure thing," I put in.

And did he ever glare at me.

"Who said anything to you?"

"That's the wash room over there," I pointed. "So step on it, dirty-face."

"I'll step on your nose with my fist," he growled.

"Such *wonderful* strawberries," I told him, kind of spiteful-like. "Be careful, dearie, that you don't get the soap in your eyes."

"Gr-r-r-r!" he showed his teeth at me.

"And when you pull the plug," I added, "watch out that you don't slide down the drain."

"Let's draw cuts," he then suggested.

"Draw cuts?" Mrs. Bibbler repeated. "What do you mean?"

"To see which ear I wash."

"Land of Goshen! From the way you act, anybody would think that soap and water was poison. And, to that point, you and Henny are just alike. Never will I forget the day he came to the table with a sooty nose. I tried to catch his eye while the minister was saying grace. But all he could see was the fried chicken."

"Fried chicken?" Red's interest picked up. "Do you usually have it for breakfast, Mrs. Bibbler?"

"Fried chicken for breakfast!" she looked at him in justified disgust. "Evidently you're a bigger pig than Henny was. Oh, dear! He

used to tax my patience, tramping in dirt and forever getting holes in things. But I'd give everything I own if I had him back in my arms."

"And you've heard nothing from him since he disappeared?"

"No," the word was spoken, after a noticeable hesitation. "Mrs. Bumblehopper says he's dead. And she thinks it would be Christianly of me to hold a funeral for him, like they did for her husband's second cousin who fell overboard on the way to China and was gobbled up by a shark. It isn't right, she says, for one to lose a member of the family, even a sailor, without having a grave to show for it. And if you're going to have a grave, she says, you've got to hold a funeral. But I say that Henny isn't dead. I may have thought so at first. But I don't think so now. He's somewhere. And some day he'll come home."

"I sure hope so," I put in feelingly.

"You can wear his old straw hat to-morrow morning, Donald. For you'll need it in the hot berry patch. But for goodness sake don't thrash around in your sleep to-night. For if there's anything that gives me the fidgets it's creaking bed-springs."

Telling Red then that I'd see him the first thing in the morning, I ran down the path to the carriage shed, where I found Rory gently strok-

ing the patient's trunk, Scoop and Peg having gone to the spring for a pail of water.

"How is he?" I inquired, kneeling beside the sick bed.

"Still alive," Rory told me, in a hushed voice.

Poor Bingo! How pathetic and helpless he looked, as he lay there with the big rubber bottle on his stomach.

"Do helephants go to 'eaven?" Rory then inquired, in his usual broken English.

"I 'ope so," I mimicked him. "But why do you ask that?"

"Oh, Hi was just thinking what a helegant funeral we could 'ave if 'e did die."

"Don't talk about it, Rory."

"We couldn't use the 'earse, though," he shook his head.

"No?"

" 'E's too big. We'd 'ave to use a truck."

"Any particular kind of flowers that you'd like?" I looked at him, kind of cold-like, figuring that he ought to have better sense than to talk that way.

"We might use sunflowers. They're big."

Later it was decided that Peg and Rory were to sit up with the patient turn about while Scoop and I went back to town.

"Whatever you do," cautioned the leader, "don't go to sleep and let him die. See that he

gets his medicine every two hours. And if he shows any bad signs, call me up right away so that I can get a doctor."

Mr. and Mrs. Meyers, of course, would jump me as soon as they saw me to find out what I knew about the runaway. So, to escape their questions, I arranged to sleep with Scoop. Anyway, I didn't care to talk with Red's mother. For I hadn't forgotten how she had run down our nice elephant, now hovering on the brink of death. In time, of course, I would forgive her. But I hadn't forgiven her yet.

"Jerry," said Mother, when I called up the house to learn if it would be all right for me to stay with Scoop, "did you know that Donald Meyers has run away with his elephant?"

"I heard that he was going to," I told her, kind of guarded-like. "But I didn't say anything about it to you, for it was a secret."

"Do you know where he is now?" came the quick inquiry.

Scoop was listening at my elbow.

"Tell her," he prompted, in his quick-minded way, "that the last we saw of Red was in Happy Hollow."

"Oh! . . ." said Mother, when I repeated the leader's message. "Then he headed north on the Treebury pike?"

"That's the road he took when he left town," I told her truthfully.

Which information, of course, was quickly passed along to the runaway's parents, who promptly started out in their car, late as it was, scouring all the country roads north of town. But they met with no one who had seen a red-headed boy riding an elephant. And what made Mr. Meyers so peeved afterwards was the thought that all the time he was chasing around the country, the "runaway," after having his lame back nicely massaged with liniment, was snoozing contentedly in Mrs. Bibbler's second-best feather bed. It was kind of funny, all right. But it wasn't funny for us in the end, least of all for poor Red himself.

CHAPTER XII

WHAT THE DETECTIVE TOLD US

Mr. Ellery never will get over laughing about the time Scoop and I paid an old shyster a dollar and a quarter apiece for memberships in a fake "Juvenile Jupiter Detective" agency. That story is all written down in my book, "*Jerry Todd and the Whispering Mummy,*" the peculiar mummy itself being the mystery that we were called upon to solve. Our first case, as you might say. I still have my badge. When I first got it I thought that it was solid silver. In fact, Mr. Arnoldsmith told me that it was. But it soon tarnished. So I seldom wear it any more. Anyway, you don't have to wear a badge to be a good detective. I've found that out.

A short, snappy-eyed, clever-acting man of considerable age, Mr. McNair smiled good-naturedly when told by Mr. Ellery, in fun, that Scoop and I were detectives, too. Shaking hands with us, the visitor said he was very glad to learn that we belonged to the "profession," for undoubtedly he would need help in his com-

ing investigations, which brought up the subject of Henny Bibbler's disappearance.

And we learned surprising things, not only about the Frenchman's "air-pocket" theory, but about Happy Hollow. Years ago, it seems, long before our dads could remember, a man by the name of Axel Prentice had similarly disappeared near the Happy Hollow spring. No one ever knew what became of him. In studying the old records of the early disappearance, the scientific society, whose job it was, the detective explained, to find out the truth about haunted houses and other supposed "phenomena," had made the somewhat surprising discovery (which might mean a great deal or nothing at all) that in both cases there had been a full moon, with the difference, however, that the man had vanished in midsummer while Henny had disappeared in January.

"Do you mean to say," Scoop interrupted, "that you go all over the country investigating haunted houses?"

"Sure thing," the detective smiled.

"And you get paid for it?"

Mr. Ellery laughed.

"Don't tell them too much about your work, Sam. Or the first thing you know they'll crib your job."

Like Scoop, it surprised me to learn that there was an organized movement on foot in

scientific circles to systematically investigate haunted houses. That looked like junk to me. But so long as the newspapers persisted in publishing sensational stories about such places, it really was necessary, Mr. McNair explained, for science to disprove these stories. Otherwise, as he expressed it, a fear of the supernatural might become universal.

"The time is coming," he spoke learnedly, "when the world will accept a new science based on what we now call mental and spiritual phenomena. There can be no doubt of that. And in anticipation of such probable scientific revealments, trickery is now practiced by unscrupulous people posing as 'mediums.' I have exposed dozens of them, some internationally famous. And I have yet to find an actual case of what spiritualists call 'materialization.' In other words, there's no such thing as a ghost, as we commonly accept the term. People do not come back from the grave in visible form. Yet there is an incalculable field of mental and spiritual phenomena, the nature and extent of which we can only surmise. It is entirely possible that we are surrounded by harmless spirit bodies, visible to another but invisible to human beings. And in the future these spirit bodies may become as useful an agent to mankind as electricity. We utilize electricity, though no one knows what it is or

where it comes from. Have you ever had your thoughts anticipated by another? In other words, have you been on the point of saying something when the very words were taken out of your mouth by some one near you? That is an example of what I mean by mental phenomena. Thought transmission will ultimately become a charted science, though as yet we have been unable to find the particular key that will unlock the door. We are exploring the great unknown, that vast area that lies between the living and the dead. We are trying to find a definite contact between that which is visible and that which is invisible. It sounds rather vague and fanciful, I'll admit. But, even so, I assure you that it is a very creditable and worthwhile endeavor."

"But what has this got to do with Henny Bibbler?" Mr. Ellery inquired.

"Nothing directly. I was just giving you an outline of my work."

"Then it isn't your notion," Mr. Ellery smiled, "that these spirit bodies of yours picked up the boy and carried him off?"

"The circumstances surrounding his disappearance are peculiar, especially when taken in conjunction with the earlier disappearance of Axel Prentice. It is entirely possible, of course, that the boy ran away from home for unknown reasons. Or he may have been ab-

ducted, or even murdered. Yet, here is a case that peculiarly bears out the 'air-pocket' theory. So I have been sent here to investigate it. . . . Are the boy's parents still living?"

"Yes."

"I'm curious to know what kind of people they are, especially the mother. For it's my understanding that she was the one who saw him last."

"I'm afraid you're wrong, Sam," Mr. Ellery spoke gravely, "if you suspect that the boy was put away by his mother. For we think a great deal of the old lady around here."

"How about the father?"

"I can't speak so well of him. In fact, it's generally conceded in his own neighborhood that there's something queer about him."

"Ah-ha!" the detective's interest quickened. "So we have an element of mystery in the parental background. . . . Tell me about him."

"Well, in the first place he's quarrelsome around the house."

"Were he and the boy in the habit of quarreling?"

"Not that I know of. But he and his wife, whose tongue is as sharp as a two-edged razor, go it hot and heavy. On one occasion he ridiculed her for wearing earrings, calling her a barbarian. They separated for more than two years, one living in the farmhouse and the other

in a little cabin on the opposite side of the creek."

"Where did the boy live during this time?"

"First with one and then with the other, as I understand it."

"Was the quarrel patched up later on?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

Mr. Ellery turned to me.

"You tell him about it, Jerry. For you were there when it happened."

The detective smiled when he heard my story.

"There you are," he spoke to Mr. Ellery. "Some one spreads the report that a certain house is haunted. And half the community foolishly believes it, however ridiculous the story may be. Then along comes the usual trickster with his sheet and other ghost-making paraphernalia. Such is the history of every haunted house that I have visited. On the whole, though, I find them very interesting. And like a patient fisherman I'm still hopeful of getting a promising nibble. . . . But tell me, Jerry, have Henny's parents been on good terms since the old man's ducking in the well?"

"They got along all right until the night Henny disappeared. Then they had another quarrel. And though Mrs. Bibbler denies it, the neighbors say that her husband whipped her."

The detective studied me curiously.

"But why should she deny it if it's true?"

"That's the queer part. She sticks up for him in other ways, too. But they don't live together."

"What was the cause of their final quarrel?"

"Nobody knows except themselves."

"Have they been questioned about it?"

"Yes, sir. But they won't tell anything."

At the detective's request, I then dished out the complete story of Henny's disappearance, exactly as I have written it down in the preceding chapters, except that I omitted all mention of Uncle Jonah. Getting out of school at four o'clock, my chum and I had skated up the winding creek, fooling along the way like boys do, so it was dusk when we came within sight of his country home. His parents had been away to a funeral. But when he saw a light in the kitchen he knew that they were home. And he was glad, too. For he wanted his ma to bake johnnycake for supper.

"He mentioned that, did he?" the detective interrupted, still eyeing me in that intent way of his.

"Yes, sir."

"And you say he asked you to stay to supper?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would he have done that, Jerry, if he had known that further trouble had arisen between his parents?"

"I don't think so."

"But you didn't go to the house with him?"

"No, sir."

"Did you notice if the cabin was lit up?"

"No, sir."

"I'm trying to find out whether the quarrel and separation that you mention took place before supper or after. And it would almost seem to me that it must have happened after the boy disappeared. For if his mother had been mistreated, as you say, or even had appeared distressed, he wouldn't have asked her to bake johnnycake for supper. Food would have been the last thing in his mind. According to report, though, supper was prepared in the usual way. Mr. Bibbler must have been there. Then the boy disappeared and the quarrel followed. . . . But let's hear the rest of your story, Jerry, exactly as it happened."

I skated back to town, I told him, it having been agreed that Henny and I should do more skating on the creek near his home when the moon came up, after which he had promised that his ma would make popcorn balls for us. But I didn't go back after supper, for it snowed between five and six o'clock, thus spoiling the skating. Then, at seven o'clock, Mrs. Bibbler

had called up to inquire if I knew where Henny was. He had disappeared, she said. She was crying. So, when I told Dad, he quickly put on his overcoat and we went out there in our car, later sending for Bill Hadley, the town marshal.

"And when you got there," said the detective, "could you still see the tracks in the snow?"

"Sure thing. Dad thought at first that Henny had backed up in his tracks, though why he should have done that, thus scaring the wits out of his mother, was more than we could understand. But every track was clean and sharp. There wasn't the least sign of backtracking."

"He may have swung into a tree."

"But there are no trees there."

"How about a hanging wire?"

"We could find none."

"You thought of that at the time?"

"Yes, sir."

"And is that all, Jerry?" the detective gave me a queer probing look.

"Yes, sir," I told him, after a brief hesitation.

Certainly, I wasn't going to tell him about Uncle Jonah in front of the others.

Mr. Ellery laughed.

"Well, Sam, are you convinced that the van-

ished boy was picked up by an air pocket?"

"I certainly haven't disproved that theory."

"But why should that make Henny vanish?" Scoop put in. "There's nothing in the air to hide him. If you can see through an air pocket, why can't you see what's in it?"

"The 'air-pocket' theory, of course, is purely suppositional. Yet I am told that it has attracted the attention of able mathematicians who hold to the belief that space has more dimensions than length, breadth and thickness."

"Which probably is all right," Scoop made a wry face, "but I'll be hanged if I know what you're talking about."

"I doubt if the mathematicians themselves know," laughed the detective. "Dr. Leo Franz, who is the originator of the 'air-pocket' theory, maintains that in the visible world there are void places—vacua, and something more—holes, as it were, through which objects or human beings may fall into the invisible world and be seen no more."

Pausing, the detective brought out a small book.

"Let me read what one supposed authority says: 'Space is pervaded by luminiferous ether, which is a material thing—as much a substance as air or water, though almost infinitely more attenuated. All force, all forms of energy must be propagated in this; every

process must take place in it which takes place at all. But let us suppose that cavities exist in this otherwise universal medium, as caverns exist in the earth, or cells in a Swiss cheese. In such a cavity there would be absolutely nothing. It would be such a vacuum as cannot be artificially produced; for if we pump the air from a receiver there remains the luminiferous ether. It would not have a single one of the conditions necessary to the action of our senses. In such a void, in short, nothing whatever could occur. A man enclosed in such a closet would neither see nor be seen; nor could he ever die, for both life and death are processes which can take place only where there is force, and in empty space no force could exist.' "

"Then," said Scoop, when the detecive had finished, "if Henny actually did walk into an air pocket, he's still alive."

"That's the theory."

"Do you believe it?"

The detective laughed and shook his head.

"But it must be so," I cried, carried away by my imagination. "For Mrs. Bibbler later heard Henny's voice."

"But did anybody else ever hear the voice?" the detective inquired.

"No," I admitted.

"Then it's quite possible that she lied."

I didn't like to have him talk that way. And

I told him so. Mrs. Bibbler was a nice old lady, I said. She wasn't the lying kind. Nor had she put Henny out of the way, either, or anything like that. For she belonged to our church and owned a Bible as big as the minister's.

"What would happen," Scoop then inquired of his relative, "if I put a foot in one of these air pockets?"

"According to the Frenchman's theory you'd lose your foot."

"But where would it go to?" my chum persisted.

"It would simply vanish. You'd have it; but you couldn't see it."

"And if I touched it, would my hand vanish, too?"

"Sure thing."

Mrs. Ellery had appeared in the doorway with a loaded tray.

"What nonsense." said she, coming into the room.

And noticing what was on the tray, Scoop promptly forgot all about "air pockets."

"Ice cream and cake," he yipped.

The Ellerys are sensible people that way. They don't have the silly notion, like some folks, that when supper is over the only thing left to do is to go to bed and sleep. That's one reason why I like to go there.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VANISHED TAIL

"WHAT do you think about it, Jerry?" Scoop inquired, when he and I were in bed.

"It was fine," I smacked. "I could have eaten a quart."

"I don't mean the ice cream," he laughed. "I mean this 'air-pocket' junk. Do you suppose there is such a thing?"

"The Frenchman must think so, or else he wouldn't have said so. For Frenchmen are smart."

"But if Henny Bibbler is still in Happy Hollow, in an air pocket, what is there to prevent us from bumping into him?"

"I wonder," I said, kind of uneasy-like.

"And suppose he fell out of the air pocket a hundred years from now. Would he still be a boy?"

"That's the way I understand it."

"Bunk," Scoop said, socking me with a pillow.

But we were soon to learn that it wasn't bunk.

Mr. Ellery and the detective sat up till after

one o'clock, sort of visiting and talking over old times. But finally they came upstairs. And finding myself peculiarly unable to go to sleep, I got out of bed and crossed the hall to the visitor's room, where I tapped lightly on the door.

"Come in, Jerry," he invited.

"How did you know it was me?" I inquired, closing the door behind me.

He gave me a peculiar smile.

"Shall I tell you the truth?"

"Sure thing."

"I've been sitting here waiting for you."

"Then you knew I was awake?"

"More than that, I knew that you wouldn't be content to go to sleep until you had told me the rest of your story."

What was he, I wondered, staring at him—a sort of wizard? I hardly knew how to act around a man like him. Still, when he put a reassuring hand on my shoulder I felt all right.

"I'm an old hand at the game, Jerry," he spoke in a kindly voice. "And having given years of study to thought transmission, a boy's mind, like his face, is usually an open book to me. . . . Is it a secret?"

"Yes, sir," I nodded. "I didn't mention it to you downstairs, for Henny told me I wasn't to tell a soul. But after he disappeared I told the marshal. And now that you've come here

to investigate the case, I think I ought to repeat the story to you."

He motioned to me to sit down beside him on the bed.

"What became of Henny Bibbler, Jerry?" he inquired.

"I don't know," I told him truthfully.

"Do you suspect that his parents put him out of the way?"

"Oh, no," I cried. "For his mother was all wrapped up in him. She wouldn't do a thing like that."

"You spoke of her having bruises on her body, which the neighbors suspected was the result of blows administered by her husband in a fit of anger. Did he have similar bruises or scratches?"

"No, sir."

"You saw him that night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"In his cabin. I went there with Dad and the marshal to question him."

"How did he act when told that his son had disappeared?"

"He seemed surprised and dazed."

"Was he frightened?"

"No, sir."

"Or excited?"

"No, sir."

"Did you get him out of bed?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what time?"

"About nine o'clock."

"And you say Henny disappeared at six o'clock?"

"Yes, sir. His mother said that the clock struck six shortly after he left the house with the water pail."

"And you got there shortly after seven o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was the table set?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had Mrs. Bibbler or Henny eaten supper?"

"No, sir."

"You saw their plates?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many plates?"

"Two."

"But where was Mr. Bibbler's plate?"

"All I saw was two plates."

"Was the johnnycake in the oven?"

"No, sir. It was in a pan on the back part of the stove."

"All of it?"

"Part of it had been taken out of the pan."

"Was the part that had been taken out of the pan on the table?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see any dirty plates in the kitchen?"

"No, sir."

There was a short silence in which I wondered curiously why the detective had asked me all these questions about the johnnycake, instead of hurrying me into my story. As yet I had told him nothing at all about Uncle Jonah and the mysterious coffin.

"This is a queer tangle, Jerry," he spoke thoughtfully. "During our earlier discussion of the case I drew the conclusion that the quarrel and consequent separation occurred after Henny's disappearance. Now I'm inclined to believe that the separation occurred before supper, or else a place would have been provided for Mr. Bibbler at the table. You saw only two plates. Neither had been used. Yet a part of the johnnycake was missing. You can see what that means, Jerry—Mr. Bibbler either came to the house and got the johnnycake or it was sent to him. If he and his wife had quarreled—and particularly if he had mistreated her—would she have divided the johnnycake with him? I don't think so. And, as I mentioned downstairs, if he had struck her before supper she probably wouldn't have cooked anything, much less going to the trouble of fixing up something special. The separation occurred *before* supper. I'm convinced of that. An-

other case of the cart preceding the horse. For if he did beat her up, as the neighbors suspect, it was done *after* Henny disappeared.

"Now, can you see any sense to that? I can't. In the first place, why did they separate? Evidently it didn't strike Mrs. Bibbler as being a matter of great importance. For she went ahead with supper just as though nothing had happened. That's odd in itself. Then Henny disappeared. An hour later his mother sounded the alarm. And evidently during that hour her husband (if we are to believe the neighbors rather than the supposedly mistreated one herself) beat her up. But for what reason? And what is the object of their silence? . . . Do you know the real facts of the case, Jerry?"

"No, sir."

"But weren't the marshal's suspicions aroused when the old farmer refused to talk?"

"Sure thing. And we searched his cabin from top to bottom. Also we put him through a regular 'third degree.' But to no success."

"Did he admit whipping his wife?"

"No, sir. He told the same story that she did."

"And she, in turn, stuck up for him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yet she still refuses to live with him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Jerry," the detective gave me a peculiar bewildered smile, "you've got the center of the stage. Let's hear your added story."

Early in December, I told him, Mrs. Bibbler had gotten word that her husband's twin brother, an old sailor named Jonah, was coming to live with them. The visitor's appearance in the neighborhood marked the beginning of a number of mysterious thefts. Convinced that the seaman was responsible for these thefts (and here I mentioned Uncle Jonah's wild stories), Henry and I had followed the old man to a haunted house, where, through a crack in the window boards, we had seen a boy-sized coffin standing on low wooden trestles. Surprising us at the window, Uncle Jonah had chased us home, which was the last that we had seen of him. For later that night he had skinned out, taking the booty and the coffin with him. Nor had he been seen or heard of since.

"How long was this before Henny disappeared?"

"Less than a week. Uncle Jonah skinned out on Friday night. And Henny disappeared the following Thursday."

"Are you sure that the thing you saw in the haunted house was a coffin?"

"I can't swear to it. For it was covered with a black cloth. But it looked like a coffin to me."

"And is it your notion, Jerry, that the old seaman made the coffin for Henny?"

"It was just his size. Still, Mr. McNair," I spoke nervously, "I can't force myself to believe that Henny was put away in that coffin by his uncle. It's too awful. But I thought you ought to know the whole story."

"Is the father still under suspicion?"

"Yes, sir."

"But nothing has been proved against him?"

"Not a thing."

"Do you think he's guilty, Jerry?"

"Sometimes I do."

"Why?"

"Because he does queer things."

"Maybe he's crazy."

"Mrs. Bibbler would see to it that he was locked up if he was."

"Do you think he murdered Henny?"

"No, sir," I shook my head. "But I think he knows more about Henny's disappearance than anybody else."

"More than Mrs. Bibbler?"

"I don't think she knew anything at first. For she took on something terrible. But a big change came over her recently. Now, I don't know what to think."

"But where does Uncle Jonah come in?"

"That's what I can't figure out, Mr. McNair. There's some connection between the coffin and Henny's disappearance. But it's entirely too deep for me."

"Did Uncle Jonah have a temper like his brother?"

"No, sir."

"Then they differed in dispositions as well as in the color of their hair?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did Henny and his uncle get along together?"

"Fine."

"Did the old seaman ever say definitely how much he was worth?"

"No, sir. But after he disappeared, Henny and I sort of concluded that all he owned was what he had stolen."

"And the neighborhood thefts stopped when he disappeared?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yet you and Henny saw nothing of the stolen goods in the haunted house?"

"All we saw was a carpenter bench and the coffin."

"Tell me more about the history of this haunted house, Jerry. Who owns it?"

"It's now a part of the Bumblehopper farm. For Mr. Bumblehopper bought it several years

ago. But it was built by a sexton named Arnold Rumson, who hanged himself in the attic."

"Why did he hang himself?"

"Because he had been caught robbing graves."

The detective shrugged.

"Certainly a nice gruesome background, if I must say so. . . . And it's your statement that Uncle Jonah never returned to his room?"

"No, sir."

"And that same night Mr. and Mrs. Bibbler were called away?"

"Yes, sir."

"How do you know that the two brothers didn't leave the farm together?"

"Because Henny's parents made the trip in an open buggy. And there would have been no room for Uncle Jonah's stuff."

"He may simply have changed the booty's hiding place. . . . Did you ever ask Mrs. Bibbler if her brother-in-law accompanied her on the trip?"

"I know he didn't," I declared. "For I told her myself that he skinned out while she was away. And she never corrected me."

There was a brief silence.

"We're going to have a lot of fun, Jerry, solving this case. I can see, too, that you're going to be a big help to me. But suppose we go to bed now and get some sleep. It'll clear

up our minds and fit us for a big day's work. . . . See you in the morning, old man."

Crossing the hall, I got into bed as quietly as I could, not wanting to awaken Scoop, who later was called to the telephone. Upon his excited return to our room he told me to get up and dress. Bingo had backed into an air pocket, he said. Peg had just 'phoned him. The elephant's tail was missing.

Henny probably had hold of the tail, was my scattered, sleepy thought, as I jumped for my clothes. For he liked elephants. His ma had said so.

CHAPTER XIV

THE EMPTY SHED

Christopher Columbus never saw a camera, a radio, a flying machine or a Ford. These things are all common enough to us. We see them almost every day. But any one of them, or dozens of other inventions that I could name, would have been considered a miracle in 1492.

So, knowing how new wonders were constantly springing up in the world, it didn't surprise me so very much that Henny Bibbler had been able to stick it out for more than four months in an air pocket without the usual daily layout of potatoes and gravy.

I didn't understand it, of course. But with the earth and everything on it flying around in the sky year after year, making every station on time without the loss of a single second, I certainly wasn't going to blat around helplessly in thus learning that the same Maker had added a few queer air pockets to His marvelous invention. Considering the size of the job as a whole, the air pockets, of recent discovery, were a mere speck on the mountain.

But if Henny Bibbler was trying to drag our

new pet by its tail into an air pocket, so that he could have the elephant all to himself, as we suspected, he certainly had his nerve. More probably, though, I considered, he was hanging to the rope-like tail in the desperate hope that the elephant, instead of backing up, would lunge forward, as most animals do when their tails are pulled (cats included), thus liberating him from his peculiar prison.

As old as the universe itself, the air pocket undoubtedly contained many curious things picked up here and there on the earth's surface throughout the past ages—gigantic dinosaurs, flying lizards as big as Dad's brickyard office, huge turtles and all kinds of prehistoric monsters. These animals, of course, would interest Henny tremendously. And I could imagine how busy he had been the first few days of his captivity taking in the sights. But now he wanted to get back home to help his ma pick strawberries and to eat johnnycake and honey. I dare say he was lonesome for me, too. And he knew that the only way to get back to the old life was to get out of the air pocket.

As you can see, a great deal now depended on the strength of the elephant's tail. If it had the right kind of stuff in it, Henny probably would be able to free himself, for, of course, the harder he pulled the harder the elephant would pull.

But how unfortunate for both if the tail broke! Poor Bingo would be the loser. His tail never could be replaced. For new tails don't grow on elephants like cucumbers on a vine. And Henny, in turn, instead of gaining his freedom, would fall over backwards in the air pocket and probably break his neck.

How wonderful, though, if he succeeded in forcing a hole in the air pocket, thus letting all the dinosaurs and other junk drop out. Boy, that sure would be some sight . . . dinosaurs and whangdoodles falling out of the sky like monstrous hailstones. It was to be hoped, though, that the dinosaurs, gigantic creatures that they are (or were), didn't drop on any of the houses in Happy Hollow. Certainly, I didn't care to have one of the bulky things drop on me.

One time I read a story about a pet snake that freed itself from its clinging dead skin by wriggling through the buttonholes of its master's coat. That gave me an idea. If by any chance Henny failed, with the elephant's help, to pull himself out of the air pocket, why couldn't we throw him a rope, to be tied around his body under his arms? His ma's old straw stack would make a peachy "buttonhole." And what if he did lose some skin when we pulled him through the straw stack, having

fastened our end of the rope to a block and tackle? That was nothing to worry about. Having successfully separated him from the air pocket (by pulling him through the stack), we then could put a charge of dynamite under the air cavity and blow it up, thus saving the world from further similar tragedies—only, of course, we wouldn't blow up the air pocket until we had found out from Henny what was in it. For we didn't want to spoil any good whangdoodle meat or mutilate other possible prisoners.

Realizing how important it was to get to Happy Hollow at the earliest possible moment, Scoop and I lit out in the moonlight. The empty streets were almost as bright as day. Turning north into the Treebury pike, we soon came within sight of the winding, snake-like creek. Peg had promised to meet us at the footbridge between Mrs. Bibbler's house and the road. And eager to hear his complete story of the tail's disappearance, we ran down the lane from the highway. But the bridge was empty.

There was a light in the small cabin. But as though its queer owner had caught sight of us in the lane, and wanted not to attract our attention, the light quickly went out, after which, as we passed the darkened cabin, a squatty black pile in the moonlight, I saw a pair of eyes

peering at us through one of the front windows.

"An odd old bird," was Scoop's comment, when I called his attention to the peeper.

"Yes," I kind of shivered, "and a dangerous old bird, too."

To tell the truth, I don't know what I meant by that. Certainly, it was wrong to hold Mr. Bibbler responsible for Henny's disappearance if the latter had been picked up by an air pocket, as we suspected. But my fear of the wife beater was too deep-rooted to be discarded on a moment's notice.

Scoop made fun of me when I stopped to break off a long willow switch. I was a big scaredy-calf, he said. But just the same, Peg having peculiarly failed us, I felt safer in knowing what was ahead of us in the lane. And as long as I could see the end of my switch, I knew that we were all right.

Early as it was (not yet four o'clock), Mrs. Bibbler was at work in her lighted kitchen. We could hear her scolding about Peg's use of the telephone. There was no use trying to sleep in *this* house, she sputtered. So, with a long forenoon's work ahead of her in the berry patch, she might just as well prepare breakfast and have it over with. She'd be that much ahead. Peeking through a window we saw Red sitting at the table rubbing his eyes. Once he nodded and almost fell out of his chair. But

he straightened quickly enough when a warm pancake was shoved under his freckled nose.

As there was no sign of Peg in the kitchen, we went on to the carriage shed, where Scoop, with all of his pretended bravery, very sensibly stopped at the open door. For our ears could detect not the slightest sound. It was like listening at the door of a tomb.

Dumfounded in the discovery that both Rory and the elephant had vanished, as well as Peg, we lit out for the house. And as though to hurry us along, the rising wind dipped down from the nearby cliffs with a peculiar moaning sound. Or was it Bingo in the air? Gosh all fishhooks! I never had such a queer helpless feeling in all my life.

"Hi," cried Red, as we tumbled into the kitchen. "You're just in time for a pancake."

"Do you know that your elephant's gone?" yelled Scoop.

"Gone?" Red stared, with the syrup dribbling from the corners of his big mouth. "What do you mean?"

We told him then that Bingo, following the loss of his tail, had completely vanished into an air pocket. And the chances were, we added, that Peg and Rory had met with the same terrible fate.

But instead of sharing our anxiety, the young runaway tipped back in his chair and laughed.

"Haw! haw! haw!" he boomed. "As though I'd believe that."

"But it's true," Scoop persisted.

"This 'air-pocket' stuff," I then explained, "is a new theory. A Frenchman discovered it. And we think that's where Henny Bibbler is."

"In an air pocket?" Red began to see that our seriousness wasn't put on.

"Sure thing."

"I don't believe it," he came out flat-footed. "For it sounds fishy."

Later, though, he was forced to admit that nothing short of the "air-pocket" theory could explain the elephant's complete disappearance.

Having been warned by the blotting out of the moon that a storm was coming up, Mrs. Bibbler was too busy running from room to room, lowering windows and closing doors, to pay any attention to what we were saying. So she didn't know that Peg's and Rory's fate was largely the result of Henny's work. For our chums, of course, never would have disappeared into the air pocket if Henny hadn't grabbed Bingo by the tail.

Scoop and I had it figured out this way: The elephant, having backed into Henny's air pocket, the latter had quickly grabbed the animal's tail, for reasons given. Then Peg had telephoned from the farmhouse. In the meantime Rory, too, had disappeared. Then Peg

himself had rammed into the air pocket. And later Bingo had backed into the air pocket, trunk and all.

"Oh, dear!" cried Mrs. Bibbler, as the increasing wind swept through the kitchen. "Just see the black clouds. It's a cyclone. I know it is. We're going to be blowed away. And I haven't got my switch on. If you boys are saved, remember that Henny's birth certificate and my Royal Neighbor policy are hidden in the bottom dresser drawer. And I want Mrs. Bumblehopper to have my black silk dress."

Further frightened by the increasing storm, as it rolled down on top of us from the cliffs, she called us into the cellar. And there we sat with our backs against the east wall, beside a big pickle crock, expecting every moment to hear the roof fall in. There was one particularly loud crash from the direction of the barn. And when we came out of the cellar ten minutes later, Red chewing a pickle, we found that the carriage shed had collapsed. There was other damage, too. But so great was the farm woman's relief to know that her house and barn had been spared that she ventured no complaint over the loss of her shed and the scattered straw stack.

It was getting daylight now. And to find out if the vanished elephant was still in the pas-

ture, in an air pocket, Scoop and I took the ends of a ball of binding twine and went down the east and west fences, from north to south. But the twine, as it stretched between us across the pasture, met with no unseen obstructions. So it was our conclusion that the air pocket in which the elephant was imprisoned had been carried off by the storm.

But we could not doubt that it would come back. For there had been earlier storms. And Henny Bibbler had managed to come back. For his mother had heard his voice.

Red's plans, of course, were now knocked sky high. He knew better than to go home. Yet he hated the thought of further running away without his elephant. Returning from our work in the pasture, we found him in the strawberry patch, groaning and rubbing his back. His misery, of course, was largely put on, lazy little runt that he is. Still, I knew how he felt. For berry picking is back-breaking work.

Mrs. Bibbler and Mrs. Bumblehopper were talking with each other over their line fence about the early-morning wind storm, the latter, it seems, having lost a whole string of sheets and pillow cases that had been left on the line over night.

But their gab didn't interest us. For we had

work to do. And telling Red in story-book style to be of good cheer (meaning that we'd do everything in our power to rescue his elephant as well as our chums) we lit out for town to see the detective.

CHAPTER XV

STARTLING DEDUCTIONS

Hurrying down the lane, we stopped dead in our tracks when we caught sight of Rory coming toward us on the run. Then, eager to get his story, we ran to meet him. But much less than clearing up the mystery for us, he stared at us in amazement when we told him that Peg and the elephant had disappeared.

Glancing over the fence, Scoop caught sight of old Mr. Bibbler, who, as he bent over his big geranium bed, was watching us out of the corner of his eye. Nor had a single word of our excited talk escaped him.

"Good morning, Mr. Bibbler," Scoop spoke over the fence.

"Humph!" grunted the farmer, bending closer to his work.

"My, what fine geraniums! Did you raise them from slips, Mr. Bibbler?"

But the gardener even refused to say "Humph!" this time.

"I have a geranium bed of my own," Scoop went on. "For I love flowers. Do you have

any of the dark-red varieties, Mr. Bibbler? If not, I'll see that you get some. For my geraniums are as big as young trees. And slipping will do them good."

You'll have to travel a long ways before you find a smarter kid than Scoop. And I saw right off that he wasn't half as eager to supply the suspected wife beater with added geraniums as he was to draw the other into conversation.

A scowl flashed across the farmer's wrinkled face when the younger one leaped the fence, dropping to his knees beside the geranium bed.

"I'd ten times over rather work with flowers than clerk in pa's store. And what beautiful fuchsias you have, too. Do you keep them in the house over winter?"

"Humph!"

"I find by loosening the dirt this way that the plants do better. It sort of gives the roots a chance to breathe. . . . Did you ever raise any caladiums, Mr. Bibbler?"

"No."

"Maybe you know them by the more common name of elephant-ears. They'd grow fine in this soil. As a matter of fact, I think the ground is a trifle too damp for geraniums. . . . Speaking of elephant-ears, did you see us when we passed your cabin last night with our sick elephant?"

"Humph!" the old man straightened. "Reckon I better go in the house and see if my teakettle's b'ilin'."

Pausing on the front porch, he looked back at us with an added scowl. And then, as though our leader's attempt to pump him amused as well as irritated him, he gave a peculiar throaty chuckle and passed into the cabin.

I don't know what Scoop's scheme was. He never told me. I suspect, though, that it was his intention to lead up to Henny's disappearance through mention of the vanished elephant. He might just as well have saved himself the effort, however. For having earlier defied the marshal, the crafty old farmer had no intention of being tripped up by a gabby boy.

"Was his hair always that red, Jerry?" the leader then inquired.

"Sure thing," I told him.

"Seemed to me as though it was redder today than usual."

"That's just your imagination."

On the way to town, Rory picked up his story where he had left off.

"As Hi say, Peg, who was even 'ungrier than Hi was, offered to put up the money for a pie if Hi'd go to town and buy hit. So Hi lit out. Hit was just two o'clock. Hi didn't meet a bloomin' soul on the way to town. But the

night patrolman collared me when Hi was turning into Mugger's all-night restaurant. My folks were looking 'igh and low for me, 'e said. And 'e made me go 'ome.''

''Was Bingo asleep when you left?''

''No. 'E was 'eecupping.''

'' 'Eecupping?'' repeated Scoop.

Rory demonstrated.

''Like this—see?''

Scoop grinned.

''You mean hiccoughing.''

''Sure thing,'' nodded Rory. '' 'Eecupping. At least that's what we call hit in England.''

''Very probably,'' Scoop theorized, as we hurried along, anxious to get to his house in time for breakfast, ''the elephant got to his feet after you left, the better to do his ' 'eecupping' outside of the carriage shed. And then is when he backed into the air pocket. For it's a cinch the air pocket couldn't very well have squeezed itself into the shed.''

As I say, Mr. Ellery thinks it's fun to kid us about being Juvenile Jupiter Detectives. So, when Scoop and I slid into our chairs at the breakfast table, after a hurried cleaning-up process in the kitchen sink, he drew his face down, sort of grave-like, and inquired earnestly if we had been called out of our bed to round up a gang of bank robbers.

"Sure thing," grinned Scoop, side-tracking the cream pitcher. "We found them hiding on top of the schoolhouse flag-pole."

"After which, I suppose," said Mr. Ellery, winking at his cousin, "you climbed the pole and put the customary bracelets on them."

"No," Scoop moved the cornflakes away, "we sawed off the pole and moved the town jail under it."

That brought a squawk from little Jim Ellery.

"I bet you never did anything of the kind," he boomed across the table.

"Tut, tut," frowned Mr. Ellery. "You mustn't talk that way to your big brother, Jimmy. You must remember that Howard is a genuine Jupiter Detective. And a genuine Jupiter Detective can do anything."

Scoop swelled up.

"Of course," he scowled at his younger brother. "So go hunt up your tinker toys and keep still."

"I hope," spoke the detective, pretending like Mr. Ellery that he believed the flag-pole story, "that you boys haven't any other pressing cases on hand this morning. For I had planned on using you."

"Henny Bibbler was a friend of ours," said Scoop, glad, of course, of the chance to join

the detective in his work. "So naturally we want to help you all we can."

"Fine," the detective beamed at us over Mrs. Ellery's basket of imitation bananas. "With three professionals working on the case, we ought to wind it up in short order. And that's really necessary. For I'm supposed to be on my way to New York City by the end of the week."

When breakfast was over I called up Mother, learning that Mr. and Mrs. Meyers, after driving all night and knocking down some man's filling station, had just gotten home with a flat tire.

"It's the strangest thing," said Mother. "They can't get track of Donald anywhere. And the man at the filling station was perfectly insulting, Mrs. Meyers says. It's his story—and he even told it to a newspaper reporter, too—that Mr. Meyers asked him if he had seen any red-headed elephants running loose. And when he said no, nor pink-eyed snakes, either, the car promptly backed into his pump."

Told further that the neighbors were listening breathlessly while Mr. Meyers fixed his tire, I decided that it was unnecessary to inquire if the runaway had been forgiven. And having nothing more to talk about, I hung up.

The detective showed considerable surprise when we told him in confidence, on our way to Happy Hollow, that another boy and an elephant had vanished on the Bibbler farm.

But he didn't see it our way, at all. Instead of Henny Bibbler pulling the elephant into an air pocket, it was far more probable, he said, taking a quick practical view of the case, that our chum had run off with the elephant to fool us, or possibly had been made to disappear.

Listening to his further talk, as we all hurried down the dusty highway, I found new fears growing up inside of me. It might be true, as he suspected, that our chum, instead of being picked up by an air pocket, was playing a joke on us. But I didn't believe it. For Peg is a mighty steady kid. And least of all would he have lied to us. No, sir-ee. When he called up he was in earnest about the vanished tail. It had strangely disappeared. And he was both excited and bewildered.

Then, leaving the farmhouse, after promising to meet us at the footbridge, something had happened to him—and this was the part that scared me. Either he had run away, or, more probably, something had nabbed him. And then, to similar mysterious ends, the elephant had been carried off.

"I'm inclined to believe," further reflected the detective, "that your chum knew a great

deal more about the farm's probable dangers than he dared to tell you over the telephone. . . . Did he say who was awake in the farmhouse?"

"He mentioned Mrs. Bibbler."

"How about the runaway?"

"Red was in bed."

"Then you have no way of knowing what passed between your chum and the farm woman before the call was put through?"

"No," Scoop shook his head.

"We can ask Mrs. Bibbler," I spoke up.

"Yes," said the detective, in a peculiar voice, "we can ask her. But it is very doubtful in my mind if she'll tell us the truth."

He seemed quite determined to pick on Henny's mother. And I didn't like it for two cents.

"You shouldn't say such things about Mrs. Bibbler," I told him. "For she's a nice old lady. She never put Henny out of the way, if that's your idea. And she never cut off the elephant's tail, either."

"Peg didn't say that the elephant's tail was cut off," Scoop corrected, not wanting the detective to get a wrong idea of things. "He just said that the tail was missing."

"And was it his opinion," the detective further inquired, "that the elephant had backed into an air pocket?"

"No," Scoop shook his head. "I was the one who started that story."

"Which is sufficient proof to me," the detective gave a quick nod, switching theories in the blink of an eye, "that your chum never ran off with the elephant, as I first suspected. For if he had wanted you to think that it had lost its tail in an air pocket he would have said something about it to lead you on."

Scoop laughed.

"How are elephants' tails fastened on, anyway?"

"Like a dog's, I suppose. But why do you ask that?"

"It's Rory's story that Bingo had a bad case of ' 'eecups.' And I was wondering if Bingo shook so hard that his tail fell off."

"I'm afraid," the detective laughed in turn, "that you'll have to dig deeper than that for the true answer to the riddle. . . . But let's go back to Mrs. Bibbler and the known circumstances attending her son's disappearance. Somewhere around supper time on the ninth of January, according to her statement, she sent him to the spring to get a pail of water. It is her further story that he never came back. And in starting out to find him, after picking up his tracks in the fresh snow, she learned that these tracks mysteriously ended. Then, supposedly, is when she called in the neighbors.

And these people, thus sent for, also saw the tracks, all sharp and clearly defined, with no sign of 'back-tracking' or other manipulation. And from that day to this, so far as we know, the world has seen nothing of Henny Bibbler."

I suddenly thought of something.

"Does Mr. Bibbler know that you were sent here to investigate Henny's disappearance?"

"No."

"He's been watching us like a hawk. And I thought maybe that was the reason."

"Henny's mother, who saw him last, and who, I might point out, escaped suspicion only through the peculiar uncompleted tracks (her alibi as it were), later circulated the surprising story that she frequently heard her vanished son's muffled voice 'in the air.' Was that a lie? Was it her imagination? Or, more strangely, was it the truth? Personally, I can't make myself believe that Henny Bibbler was swallowed up by an air pocket. Nor do I believe that his mother actually heard his voice 'in the air.' That, to my notion, is too fanciful. So I am left to decide whether the old lady, in the possible breaking down of her mind (and it may be that the informed husband, much less of a brute than the neighbors believe, is trying to shield his wife through silence), let herself believe that she heard her son's voice, or whether, as seems more probable to me, she

lied. If so, why did she lie? Did she do it to further shield herself and her husband from possible suspicion? Or was there some deeper, some more mysterious motive?

"A summary of the compiled reports bearing on the son's disappearance, as turned over to me by the society, presents no evidence that the boy had planned on running away from home. Certainly, if he had thought of doing such a thing he wouldn't have arranged with his chum to go skating in the moonlight.

"And why should he run away? He had a good home. His mother seemingly was devoted to him. And while his father was cross around the house, we have no evidence that the boy was mistreated. He had as many things as the average boy. For instance, we know that he had skates. And we know that his mother enjoyed cooking the things that he liked, including johnnycake and popcorn balls. If he had any doubts of his mother's affection he wouldn't have promised his chum popcorn balls in advance."

"Some people say he ran away from home because of his parents' final quarrel," I put in.

"Yes," the detective nodded, "I've heard about that. But, as I told you last night, Jerry, I'm thoroughly satisfied that the quarrel took place *after* he disappeared. And so we are faced by one of two probable facts: Either

he ran away that night, with or without his parents' consent, or they strangely made away with him. If he did run away, plainly he was unprepared. Something turned up on a moment's notice to make it necessary for him to run away. And he either covered over his own tracks, in a way that no one has been able to explain, or his parents (more likely his mother) did that for him. Or, to a more sinister view, if they put him out of the way, for reasons unknown to us, they then faked the uncompleted tracks to ward off suspicion."

"But if they were so anxious to escape suspicion," I again put in, "why didn't they tell the truth about their final quarrel?"

"That is one of the things that has yet to be explained, Jerry. But let us go back to the tracks. Granting that they *were* manipulated, how was it accomplished? There could have been a wire in the trees, put there for the occasion and later taken down before the neighbors were called in. However, it strikes me that the boy's disappearance, happening so soon after a new fall of snow, is more than a mere coincidence. I have an idea in that direction. But before discussing it I want to find out, if I can, just when the snowstorm started and when it ended. It's my understanding that it came and stopped quickly, the equivalent of a twenty-minute midsummer downpour.

"But for the moment let us forget about January snows and jump to June. A new mystery has sprung up. On the same farm another boy has disappeared,. And my contention is, based on my theories of the other case, that your chum was made to disappear against his will, probably because, in some way or another, he had penetrated the farm's secrets. He may have told Mrs. Bibbler of his discoveries. And it may have been at her suggestion that he concealed his real motive in calling you by making up the story of the vanished tail. You say he talked excitedly. The elephant, according to his report, had mysteriously lost its tail. And he wanted you to come to the farm without delay. But suppose the elephant had lost his tail. Wouldn't he then have gone back to the barn to wait for you near the elephant, instead of promising to meet you at the footbridge?

"His actions are proof to me that he had something to tell you of far greater importance than the possible loss of your pet's tail. That is why he wanted to meet you at the footbridge. He had found out that some strange peril was hanging over the farm—a peril, let us say, dating back to the year's beginning. And he wanted to meet you at the entrance to the farm to thus assure your safety.

"And what happened? Mrs. Bibbler overheard him tell you on the telephone that he

would wait for you at the footbridge. She knew why he wanted to meet you there. For, as I have mentioned, he probably had told her of his discoveries. I'm going to assume, whether you agree with me or not, that she didn't want him to meet you. And so, in ways I have yet to discover, both he and the elephant were made to disappear, which proves, I think, that it was through the elephant, strangely, that he penetrated the farm's secrets. He was put away to keep him from talking; and the elephant was put away in fear that you, too, in being around it, might learn its damaging secrets.

"According to your own statement, about an hour elapsed between the telephone call and your appearance at the carriage shed. Had the elephant been killed it couldn't have been buried in so short a time. So I'm inclined to believe that it is still alive. Nor can it be any great distance from the farm.

"So you can see the work laid out for us. We must search every foot of the hollow for a possible hiding place. There may be a secret cave in the sandstone cliffs. Or possibly a hidden chamber under the barn. I'm going to ask you boys to conduct the search. In the meantime I'm going to have a nice friendly chat with the old lady."

Well, say! I was so blamed twisted up in

my mind from listening to all this talk that I didn't know whether I was Jerry Todd or my own grandfather. Henny Bibbler had brained our elephant with an empty water pail and his mother had made him johnnycake with skates on. That's the way things were going around in my head. But I gradually got myself straightened out.

Could it be, I asked myself in growing horror, thinking of all the good times that I had had at Henny's house (with his ma putting so much butter on the popcorn and everything), that my chum had actually been put away by his own parents? If so, what had driven them to such a terrible crime? Were they both crazy? And had Mrs. Bibbler in particular gotten that way from talking too much?

There was Uncle Jonah, too. Where did he come in? And what was the secret of the mysterious coffin?

It was soon proved, however, that the detective, smart as he was, had widely missed the mark in one of his most important deductions. Crossing the footbridge, Red at sight of us came on the run. He was waving something in his right hand. Even at a distance the object looked familiar to me. And when he came closer I saw that it was indeed Bingo's missing tail.

"I found it in the strawberry patch," the

freckled one told us. "At first I thought it was a snake. What do you suppose makes it so stiff?"

It was stiff, the detective said, in quick examination of the tail, because it had been dead for several days. It even had a bad smell.

Limbs die on trees. And it would seem now that Bingo's tail had died in much the same way. That is why it had broken off. But how had it gotten into the strawberry patch? Could it be possible, I considered, that Scoop and I were right after all? And had the tail dropped out of an air pocket during the recent storm?

I looked up in the sky. But there was no sign of our elephant. All I could see was a crow.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TELLTALE HAIR

It was quickly settled in my mind, as I washed my hands in the creek to get rid of the nasty smell, that Bingo's tail had indeed dropped out of an air pocket.

Henny had pulled the tail off. That is, as I have written down in an earlier chapter, he had pulled on the rear-end piece to rescue himself, not knowing that the tail was dead, and it, unfortunately, had broken off.

Then is when the elephant, all roiled up over the loss of its tail, had wheeled and jumped into the air pocket. Later the storm had cracked the air pocket. And it was through this crack, of course, that the dead tail had dropped back to earth.

But would Peg and Henny be able to widen the crack so that they, too, could escape from the air pocket? I not only hoped so, but I made up my mind, as their loyal chum, to keep a close watch on things, figuring that if I once got a peek at them through the crack I probably could help them.

And then, of course, we would all turn a

hand to Bingo's rescue, though, as I could see, the crack would have to stretch to beat the cars to let *him* pass through.

Poor Bingo! How grieved he would be over the loss of his tail. And how odd he would look. With his big trunk hanging down in front, and nothing behind, he would seem all out of proportion. But, even so, we would love him just the same. Tail or no tail, he would still be our dear little playmate.

Yes, sir, to my notion it was a whole lot more sensible to believe that Henny Bibbler had been swallowed up by an air pocket than that he had been put away by his parents, as the detective suspected. Mr. McNair was a smart man. He plainly had had a lot of experience in this line of work. And his deductions, as he had spread them out in a sort of endless chain, had sounded convincing. But, even so, I knew that Mrs. Bibbler was a good woman. She had her secrets, of course. But it was silly to think that she had aided in Henny's disappearance. Certainly, she could have had no part in his disappearance if he had been picked up by an air pocket, as I now firmly believed.

How peculiar, though, that both she and her queer-acting husband should seal their lips on their final quarrel, as it had led to supposed brutal blows. Were they afraid that if they told the truth about their quarrel that they'd

be held responsible for Henny's disappearance? It would seem so. But in what way did their quarrel connect up with the air pocket, granting that there was such a connection? That's what puzzled me.

The detective had made it appear in his deductions that Henny's parents were a bad pair. More than that, he had led me to believe that Mrs. Bibbler in particular was responsible for Peg's and the elephant's disappearance. But how silly that was. For Peg had double her strength. So how could she make him disappear, much less a sick elephant weighing thirteen hundred pounds?

The answer was, of course, that the detective was wrong, as the recovered tail proved. Peg's motive in calling us up was to tell us, excitedly, about the vanished tail. That and nothing more. Then, unfortunately, he had followed Bingo into the air pocket.

But though I disagreed with the detective, as recorded, I was none the less eager to help him. For he was smart. And it stood to reason that I could pick up a lot of good stuff from him. So, lighting out for town, the investigator having asked me to find out all that I could about the recorded weather conditions for January the ninth, I later turned in at the post office where Mr. Castor, the postmaster, smiled at me through the stamp window.

"Well, Jerry," he inquired pleasantly, "what can I do for you this morning?"

Everybody in Tutter likes Mr. Castor, kindly old gentleman that he is. And particularly do I like him. For he keeps me posted on new stamp issues, stamp collecting being one of my hobbies.

"I'm looking for the weather man," I told him, matching his smile with one of my own.

"Meanin' which?" said he curiously, as he kind of stretched his neck through the window.

Told then that I wanted to check over the old weather forecasts, as supplied by the government weather bureau to all regular post offices, this one included, he slowly shook his head.

"I've never been instructed to keep these forecasts on file, Jerry. In fact, they're thrown into the waste-paper basket as soon as I take them down."

Here a stoop-shouldered old man meandered into the post office, sort of shuffing-like. And did I ever shut up like a clam when I got a look at the newcomer's face.

"Good morning, Mr. Bibbler," greeted the friendly postmaster. "Eager to get your morning newspaper, heh? Well, here it is. Jest been reading it myself. And here's another letter for your brother Jonah. Shall I forward it? Or will you take care of it?"

Mumbling something under his breath, the farmer took the letter and thrust it into his pocket, after which he hurried out of the post office as fast as his stiff legs would permit.

Our eyes met as the screen door closed behind him, thus proving that he had recognized me. And for a moment or two, as his left hand gripped the letter in his coat pocket (at least I let myself imagine that he was clutching the letter with a nervous hand), I thought that he was going to come back and say something to me. Then he passed on out of sight.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" laughed the observing postmaster. "Doesn't he like you?"

"He used to," I replied, with a kind of scattered feeling.

"He gave you a queer look."

And I knew why, too.

"Say, Mr. Castor," I spoke excitedly, "will you watch for that letter when it comes through the mail and give me a copy of the forwarding address?"

"I hardly expect to see the letter again, Jerry. For that's the third one he's taken home. And the others never came back."

Which, of course, was a big disappointment to me. For I had jumped to the conclusion that the mysterious-acting farmer was peculiarly informed on his twin brother's whereabouts. But if the letters never came back for forwarding,

as the postmaster said, it was very probable that they were being held on the farm for the missing one.

In our further talk about government weather forecasts, the postmaster pointed out to me that his reports were all of a general character, covering a wide area. So it was very doubtful, he said, if the forecast for the ninth of January would be of any particular help to me. And at his suggestion I started in search of Doc Marchant.

"It's my understanding, Jerry," I was told, as I stood with my hand on the knob of the screen door, "that Doc keeps a daily itemized record of local weather conditions. A hobby of his. Anyway, see what he has to offer. And then, if you still feel that a general weather forecast will be of use to you, I'll try and get a duplicate report from the Washington office."

Like the postmaster, Doc Marchant is an old friend of mine. The town's leading veterinary, he frequently takes me on long rides into the country where he tests cattle and doctors sick pigs. So, as you can imagine, I had no trouble getting a peek at his diary, which supplied exactly the information I required. And making a copy of the report, I lit out for Happy Hollow.

Like myself, Scoop had not the slightest doubt that the elephant, instead of disappear-

ing at the hands of Mrs. Bibbler, had vanished into an air pocket. And getting further proof of this, in his instructed search of the farm, he came running to meet me with eyes as big as saucers.

"Jerry," he cried, "we're right about the elephant."

"Have you seen it?" I cried in turn, thinking, of course, in growing excitement, of the probable crack in the air pocket.

"No," he shook his head, "but I heard it."

I then went with him to the cow pasture in the middle of which he stopped dead still, motioning for silence. At first I could hear nothing except the pounding of my own heart. Then, out of the air—and I want you to believe this, for it's as true as the day I was born—came a faint whispering, whimpering sound. It seemed to be very close to us. Yet, too, in a way that I can hardly describe, it seemed always to be far away.

Again we got out our binding twine. But the air pocket was too high up for us. Nor could we touch it with a long fishing pole. Yet all the time we were at work we could hear that peculiar whimpering voice.

We called Peg and Henny by name. But if they heard us they were unable to answer. Which was strange, in a way. For if we could hear the elephant, whimpering in pain over the

loss of its tail, why couldn't we hear our chums, who undoubtedly were imprisoned in the same air pocket?

Meeting the detective at the barn, I curiously searched his face, wondering how he had come out with Mrs. Bibbler. I wondered, too, if he had talked with Mr. Bibbler, following the latter's return from town.

"Well, what luck?" the investigator inquired, in his jolly, genial way.

Explaining the source of my information, I told him that the local snowstorm preceding Henny's disappearance had started at five-forty, continuing until ten minutes after six.

"Fine work, Jerry," I was warmly patted on the back. "There's the makings of a real detective in you."

Scoop then gave his report. But though the detective listened attentively, he still refused to take any stock in our revived "air-pocket" theory. Nor did we get anywhere when we took him into the pasture to prove to him that we know what we were talking about. Either the crack had closed up in the air pocket, thus cutting off the whimpering voice, or the whole pocket, with all that was in it, had blowed away.

Our imaginations, we were told with a grin, had played a trick on us. Then, watching his chance, the detective drew me aside.

"Jerry," said he gravely, "I've made a most

amazing discovery. Instead of the farmer's twin brother disappearing the night you and Henny followed him to the haunted house, as you suspected, it was the farmer himself who disappeared."

I was then shown a single red hair.

"Take a close look at it," the detective instructed, putting the folded white paper in which the hair was contained into my hands.

"It looks gray at one end," I told him.

"It is gray. In fact, the red that you see is a dye, probably henna, the gray part, representing the hair's more recent growth, being its true color."

I stared at him.

"But Henny's pa's hair really was red," I declared.

"Exactly," he nodded. "And that is why I contend that the man now masquerading as the vanished boy's father isn't the supposed parent, at all, but the rascally uncle, of whose peculiar thieving and coffin-building activities you gave me a very comprehensive account last night."

"And you're sure," I cried, in mounting bewilderment, "that this is one of his hairs?"

"When he was in town this morning I searched his cabin, finding this hair, together with many more like it, in his hairbrush."

"And the coffin!" I cried breathlessly. "Did you find that, too?"

Which, in a way, was a foolish question. For certainly, if the mysterious coffin had been put away in the cabin, Bill Hadley and I would have discovered it in our earlier search of the place.

"No," the detective shook his head. "I saw nothing of the coffin. Nor did I find any of the 'loot' that you told me about. This hair is the only thing of importance that came to my attention."

CHAPTER XVII

THE GHOST IN THE BERRY PATCH

No wonder Henny Bibbler's "parents" had separated! For if the detective had the right dope (and I didn't doubt it for a second, however much it bewildered me) the man that the puzzled neighbors mistook for the "brutal" husband, now living alone in the little cabin where the real husband had lived during the earlier separation, wasn't the supposed husband, at all, but the latter's rascally twin brother, whose gray hair had been dyed red in imitation of the other man's hair.

Which further explained why the letters addressed to Jonah Bibbler never came back to the post office with a forwarding address!

"I would hate to think," said the detective gravely, as he and I further discussed the peculiar tangle, "that your chum's father had been put out of the way. In fact, there is nothing in the old lady's actions to suggest that. Plainly, though, many amazing things happened here the week the boy disappeared. And when this is cleared up (assuming that the boy's disappearance and his uncle's return are

coincidental), I am confident that the complete mystery will have been solved."

The mere thought that old Mr. Bibbler had been put out of the way gave me the shivers, the more so when I caught sight of Uncle Jonah (as I'll now call him) on his front porch.

"There he is now," I clutched the detective's arm.

"Yes," said the latter, following my eyes, "and I have the feeling that he knows that he has about come to the end of his rope."

This "rope" talk further disturbed me.

"Will they hang him," I inquired, kind of shivery-like, "if it is proved that he committed a crime?"

"They should. But let's cling to more pleasant thoughts, Jerry. For it is much more probable in my mind that the old farmer has suffered no worse harm than imprisonment."

"But why should Mrs. Bibbler and Uncle Jonah imprison him?"

"As I say, strange things happened here the week Henny disappeared. And speculation, I fear, is purely a waste of time."

I thought of Peg and the vanished elephant.

"And is it your further opinion," I inquired, "that the elephant and Henny's father are imprisoned in the same place?"

"Very probably."

"But how about Henny himself?"

"The indications are, Jerry, that he peculiarly ran away from home."

I didn't believe that.

"It was from you that we first learned about air pockets," I told him. "Yet you are the one who least believes in them."

There was a big smile on his face as he looked down at me.

"And you still contend, Jerry, that Henny is imprisoned in an air pocket?"

"I most certainly do. And the elephant, too. For we heard it this morning as plain as anything."

"Did you hear Henny?" the man further smiled.

"No."

I was then told that imagination was a fine thing. Without it a detective didn't get far. But it was well for a beginner to keep his imagination in check. After which the investigator hurried off to town, telling me the very last thing to stick around the farm until he returned. And I was made to feel from his manner that if I did stick around I'd get the surprise of my life.

"He seemed to be an unusually smart man for an old-clothes buyer," Mrs. Bibbler told me, when I quizzed her about the detective's visit. "And now that he helped me remove the

ink spots from Henny's school suit, I'm going to keep the suit, instead of selling it, pressing it nice and neat, hoping, of course, that it will be needed this fall, though I dare say it'll fit Henny like a glove. Still, if he can possibly get into it, he's got to wear it out. For nothing goes to waste in this house. As I told the clothes buyer, when he looked at Henny's cap, much less than having clothes to sell, we were lucky, poor as we are, and with such big doctor bills to pay, to have enough to keep us warm, however shabby we might look at times."

"Doctor bills," I repeated. "What doctor bills do you mean?"

A frightened look crossed her face.

"I'm paying up some old doctor bills, Jerry," she spoke hurriedly.

Which might be true. But why, I wondered, my detective instincts aroused, did she act so queer about it?

"Say, Mrs. Bibbler," Red unexpectedly stuck his freckled mug in the kitchen door, "can I have a cookie?"

"Land of Goshen!" came sharply from the farm woman, who, I felt, was glad of the interruption. "I thought I told you to stay in the strawberry patch?"

"Gee-miny crickets! I can't do any work if I don't eat."

"Eat? That's the trouble with you, Donald Meyers—you want to be eating all the time. . . . Did you fill the crate I gave you?"

Red sank wearily into a chair.

"Mrs. Bibbler," he rolled his eyes in that begging way of his, "I'm going to tell you the truth: I'll never be able to fill that crate if you don't fill me first."

And again I was compelled to sit and look on while he stuffed his homely face with cookies and cake . . . the lucky pup!

"Um-yum-yum!" he smacked. "This is heaven."

"Did I tell you, Donald, that I had a telephone call from your mother?"

"WHAT!" the star boarder almost collapsed.

"Oh," smiled the farm woman, "she didn't call up to inquire about you. She wants me to save a crate of berries for her. So, if you wish, you can pick the crate yourself, putting in the choicest berries in the patch. . . . Has Henny's pa showed up yet?"

"No."

"Laws-a-me! I wonder if he thinks I'm going to do all the work on this farm?"

Henny's pa! What was her object, I wondered, in aiding the old seaman in his deception? And what reason had she to believe that Henny would return in time for school?

Asked then if she knew where he was (and I did that to draw her out), she started to say something, but stopped. And a combined worried and wary look crossed her face.

"As Henny's trusted friend, Jerry, I'm going to tell you the truth: I *do* have a very definite idea where he is. Not that I've heard from him; or that anybody has told me he's where I think he is. It's just an idea, as I say."

But when I asked her outright if Henny was imprisoned in an air pocket, she almost stared a hole through me. Then a peculiar smile crossed her face.

"My answer is this, Jerry: *Listen carefully when you are near the spring.*"

Then, as her thoughts returned to the "old-clothes buyer," she ran on in her talkative way.

"Mrs. Bumblehopper came in while he was here, probably having watched him cross my footbridge. And you should have seen how put out she was when he inquired if we were twins. Nor did he seem to want to believe her when she told him (very stiffly, mind you) that I was twenty years the oldest. So she brought out my Bible to show him the family records, thus establishing the date of my birth—which, I thought, was a nervy piece of business. If you happen to see him go by, you might tell him that I have some rag rugs that I'll be glad to sell. I never thought of them when he was

here. And you might add that if he drops in around five-thirty I'll give him his supper. Such a pleasant man as he was to talk to. I don't think he interrupted me once."

Listening attentively, I could not doubt that the skillful investigator (posing as an old-clothes buyer) had a secret object in taking the ink spots out of Henny's school suit. And he probably had a further secret object in checking up on Mrs. Bibbler's birthday. But why he then had headed for Mendoto, which was the information that Scoop brought back from dinner, was a mystery to me.

Could it be, I wondered, that Henny's aunt's death entered into the mystery? Gosh! I never had thought of that. But unless he had some such thought, I concluded, the detective never would have motored to Mendoto, which, you will remember, was the place where the late relative had been buried.

The elephant came back that afternoon. We heard it off and on for more than thirty minutes. Once the sound seemed directly over our heads. But we could see nothing. Nor did we get any reply from our imprisoned chums when again we called their names.

Scoop wondered at my frequent trips to the spring. And I don't mind telling you that I had a queer feeling as I stood there in the self-same spot where Henny had disappeared. Once

I thought I heard a long sigh. And I was sure that it was his voice. But the leader said it was the wind in the trees.

Late in the afternoon the telltale frying pans and boiled ham were discovered in the creek by two minnow catchers, after which, of course, as the story spread, a curious crowd quickly gathered near the scene of the runaway's unhappy tip-over. We could hear Mr. Meyers talking above everybody else. But when we later reported the affair to Red, who was hiding in the haymow, we mercifully passed over some of the things his father had said. The poor kid. His folks, or course, wouldn't dare to skin him alive, as Mr. Meyers had threatened to do when the thirty-dollar folding mattress was dragged out of the creek. But there was no doubt that the runaway, when finally rounded up, would catch "Hail Columbia."

I sure was glad it wasn't me.

Rory skinning out for home at six o'clock, Scoop and I earned our supper at the farm by milking the cows and listening to Mrs. Bibbler's endless talk. The clock struck eight; then nine. And still the detective hadn't showed up. We couldn't understand it.

Shortly after nine Red went off to bed, groaning and taking on. He ached all over, he said, and his sunburned skin was as sore as a boil. We did what we could for him with Mrs. Bib-

bler's jar of cold cream. And to cheer him up we told him, as we spread the grease around on his blistered neck, that every cloud had a silver lining. Yes, and every casket had silver trimming, is what he dished out to us in return, which shows you clearly enough how unhappy he was.

It is generally admitted down our way that Red is one of the homeliest kids in town. Even his mother sighs when she looks at him. He has smart, overbearing ways, too. But he's loyal to his chums. And conscious of this good quality in him, my heart went out to him. For there was no doubting his misery. It was genuine. But there was nothing that I could do to help him, or Scoop either, except to grease him up, as I have mentioned.

"I wish I could turn into a humming bird," he spoke miserably, as Scoop and I eased him into bed.

"Make it a buzzard," the leader told him, arranging the pillows. "Then you can eat more."

"I'd fly away to Australia."

"Why not turn into a worm and hunt a hole?" I suggested.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to be a worm . . . What did pa say, Jerry?"

"About the folding mattress?"

"No. About me."

As though I'd tell him!

"You'll come out all right, Red," I kind of leaned over him.

"I wish you'd sleep with me, Jerry."

"What's the matter?"

"I feel lonesome."

The poor kid.

"Was ma there, Jerry?"

"No."

"Have you seen her to-day?"

"No."

"Do you suppose she's crying because I ran away?"

"Probably."

"I—I wish I could see her."

"Don't lose your grit, Red."

"What day is this, Jerry?"

"Thursday."

"THURSDAY! Oh, oh!" he groaned.

"What's the matter now?"

"Thursday is 'tomato-soup' day at our house."

The crazy nut.

At nine-thirty Mrs. Bibbler stopped talking to wind the clock and put out the house cat, which, we took it, was a gentle little hint for Scoop and I to go home.

And what now? Should we further wait around for the detective, as instructed? Or should we skin out for town and sound the alarm of Peg's disappearance, as we had been

wanting to do all the afternoon? Not that anyone could do any more for him than we had done. But, even so, it was right, we thought, that his folks should be told of his disappearance.

It was finally decided that I was to wait at the footbridge, sort of on duty, as it were, while Scoop ran home to learn where the detective was.

And as I sat there, all alone, watching the moon, a peculiar apprehension took hold of me.

Axel Prentice, the detective had said, had disappeared on a moonlight night. So, also, had Henny Bibbler. Then, so very recently, Peg and Bingo had met with the same peculiar fate. The mystery that hung over the farm, like a huge black-winged bat, was a night mystery. When the moon came the mystery came.

And it was in the moonlight that Uncle Jonah prowled through the hollow with a market basket on his arm! I saw him now, at the far end of the lane. And as though he realized that I had spotted him, he stepped into the bushes out of sight.

Uneasy, I got up and paced back and forth across the footbridge, the feeling steadily growing inside of me that I was being watched. Something near me was getting closer and closer. Could it be, was my crazy thought, that Uncle Jonah, bad egg that he was, had a way of

getting into and out of a small air pocket? And thus concealed, was he now closing in on me?

Splash! It was a small fish, jumping in the creek. But my first wild thought was that something was wading toward me—*something I couldn't see.*

I ran to the turnpike. But Scoop wasn't in sight. Then, more slowly, I went back down the hill.

During the time that I had been away something tall and white had appeared near the berry patch, headed in that direction.

It was a ghost!

CHAPTER XVIII

UP THE CREEK

The only thing that saved me from being scared to death was Mrs. Bumblehopper's barbed-wire fence. For when the ghost got hooked on the fence it talked naturally—meaning the ghost, of course, and not the fence. So I knew it wasn't a real ghost. It was a man dressed up like a ghost, probably in one of the neighbor's missing sheets.

But who could it be? That's what got me. Certainly, it was much too spry for Uncle Jonah.

Being a detective myself, I quickly made up my mind to do some capturing stuff, realizing, of course, that the man, whoever he was, undoubtedly was an important part of the mystery. If necessary, I swelled importantly, remembering how Mr. McNair had patted me on the back, I'd do the capturing single-handed, though, to be frank, I was perfectly willing to let Scoop help me.

Getting down low, I sleuthed myself in proper style through the weeds and sand burs, hopeful that the leader soon would show up.

Gee! The ghost, as I now had a closer look at him ("him" being a better word to use, I think, than "it"), was a lot bigger and huskier than I had thought. So I didn't try to crowd him into a corner.

Watching him through the parted weeds, I wondered, in growing curiosity, what his idea was in tramping around and around in the berry patch. Then the truth came to me like a flash. He was searching for the elephant's tail.

Red had buried the tail back of Mrs. Bibbler's hog house. So the ghost, of course, in the end, had to go away empty-handed. I followed him up the hollow, along the creek bank, dodging from one willow clump to another. Was he heading for the haunted house? It would seem so. Then, to my very great relief, he left the winding creek and took to the turnpike.

Pretty soon the old Scotch cemetery came into sight on the left-hand side of the road, peculiarly reminding me of the night that I came here in search of Red Meyers, as recorded in one of my earlier books, "*Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot.*" If you have read that book you will remember what a scare I got when I fell through the rotten floor of the old manse, around which aged building the cemetery had grown up. Br-r-r-r! That, I think,

is the spookiest thing that ever happened to me.

Dad says that a cemetery is the safest place on earth. It isn't the dead that we have occasion to fear, he contends, but the living. Which probably is true. But to my notion a cemetery, at night, is a mighty good place for a boy to keep away from. Certainly, I had no desire to indulge in any further moonlight strolls in *this* cemetery. For it was here, according to Henny Bibbler's story, that the sexton had been hugged by a corpse.

There's a big cherry orchard beyond the cemetery. And it so happened that Bid Stricker and his crummy gang had been out there making a moonlight raid. I heard their voices even before they came into sight in the winding road.

"Poof!" said Bid, in that swaggering way of his. "Don't talk to me about ghosts. For there is no such thing."

"Just the same," said Jum Prater, "I bet you're scared to climb over the cemetery fence."

"*Me?* Don't talk silly, little one."

"Every time I see a tombstone in the moonlight," piped Chet Milden, "it reminds me of marble eyes."

"Tombstones *are* eyes," declared Jum. "My aunt told me so."

"You and your aunt!" scoffed Bid.

"The tombstones watch," said Jum. "Like guards. And when everything is safe the ghosts come out."

"Out of where?"

"The ground, of course."

"And then what do they do?"

"Eat dead bodies, I guess."

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed Jimmy Stricker.

"What's the joke?" Bid inquired.

"I was just thinking how we'd scatter if a white cow stuck its head over the fence."

"Not me, kid."

"Oh, is that so? How about the time on Oak Island when Jerry Todd chased you down the hill?"

Bid loves to hear about that—like so much mud!

"I just ran to keep you company," he lied.

"Like fun," Jum swung in, who was there at the time and remembered everything that happened, exactly as I wrote it down in my "Oak Island Treasure" book. "If anybody happens to ask you, you were the first one to reach the foot of the hill. And the chances are you'd be running yet if I hadn't told you that what you thought was a ghost was Jerry Todd dressed up in a white nightshirt."

"Just the same," said Jimmy, "Bid is a brave guy. Some nights he even goes to bed in the dark."

After which jab, Bib felt that it was up to him to prove that he was by no means as big a coward as the others tried to let on. So he marched through the cemetery arch as big as cuffy, daring Jimmy and Jum to follow him, which they did. But you should have seen the leader light out, and the others with him, when the "ghost" that I was following suddenly stepped into plain sight.

Why the man did it, I don't know, unless it was that he got a kick out of scaring them. But, as you can imagine, it was pie and ice cream for me. For the way those crummy bums did run. Oh, baby!

The Strickers having been put to flight, the ghost, leaving the road on the right-hand side, swung down a hill to the floor of the hollow where again he took to the creek bank. Presently we turned into a canyon, with towering sandstone cliffs on each side. And here the ghost disappeared into a cave.

Crawling closer, as a light sprang up, I discovered that the "ghost," a stranger to me, was a tall, thin man with kinky hair and a good-natured mouth. He didn't look a bit hard-boiled. I couldn't understand it.

"Well, Peg," the man spoke cheerfully to a second unseen occupant of the cave, "I'm going to leave you. For the Fates are against me. Much less than bringing home the bacon, as the

saying is, I've failed even to bring home the elephant's tail. A sad, sad tale, as you might say—as my employer undoubtedly will remind me when I get back to Newark."

Gee! My ears were sticking up like corncobs in a mud hole. For I could not doubt that the "Peg" thus spoken to, in such crazy style, was *our* Peg. And I had been so dead sure that he was imprisoned in an air pocket!

"Aren't you going to untie me?" another voice spoke up. And did I ever want to hug myself with joy. For it *was* our Peg, just as I had suspected. But where were Bingo and Henny Bibbler? Were they here, too, and old Mr. Bibbler with them?

The man cleared his throat.

"Untie you, Peg? Oh, no! For I prefer not to have you follow me. There is safety in numbers—or should I say in secret flight? But now that you have drawn my attention to your —ah—fetters, I want to leave the thought with you that I shall always remember you as a model of patience. The perfect prisoner. Nothing to eat all day long, except dry crackers. Yet not a single complaint. And how merrily we whiled away the dreary afternoon hours by playing checkers with pebbles on the stone floor of our—ah—rustic boudoir. And how blithe the conversation—mostly of my own fabrication. Memories, Peg. Always, wher-

ever I go, in jail and out, I shall carry with me the recollection of this pleasing and yet wholly unexpected adventure."

The crazy nut!

"Now, Peg, I am off. And in case the hour-glass of our lives dribbles its last dribble, without my kings further jumping your kings, or vice versa, remember that we shall eat meat in heaven . . . instead of crackers. Or, in other words, we'll have a nice day to-morrow if it doesn't snow."

Here a gun went off. And I don't mind telling you that I almost jumped out of my skin. For my first wild thought was that Peg had been shot.

I stopped, though, at the mouth of the cave when the man's further gab struck my ears.

"As one of your pals is waiting outside, having cleverly followed me here from the berry patch, it—ah—just occured to me," the crazy nut went on, "that I ought to let him know that I'm armed, thus warding off any possible attempt of his to stop me. As a matter of fact, great lover of boys that I am, it would grieve me beyond words to put a bullet through one of his perfectly good legs. So, be of blithe spirits, my hearty. For though I leave you in fetters your chum will soon be here with his trusty jackknife. Succor is at hand. And be-

yond the horizon, of course, ham and gravy await in plenty."

Here he came out of the cave, humming jauntily to himself and sort of merrily twiddling a shiny revolver.

"Lovely evening," he beamed at me.

I finally found my voice.

"Who are you?" I cried.

"*Me?* Oh, I'm the guy who put the pick in pickles. Ever hear of Adam and Eve? Well, Adam and I are twin sisters. Ta-ta, you dear sweet thing. The next time I see your picture in the *Police Gazette* I'll kiss it. And always remember, Sherlock Homely, that he who sees a ghost and runs away lives to see a ghost another day. Trickery, my boy. I knew that if I played 'ghost' you'd follow me home. So, do your stuff, kid—Peg needs you."

I don't know what anybody could say to a nut like that. And before I came to my senses, as it were, he had passed out of sight. Nor did I ever see him again. I'd like to. For he was funny.

Well, I ran into the cave, quickly slashing the ropes that bound Peg's wrists and ankles, after which old hefty, in great joy over his liberation, told me his story. But before I write it down, I want to tell you about the later collision in the Bibbler lane.

Headed for town on the run, a rickety delivery truck picked us up near the cemetery. But instead of making room for us on the front seat, the driver told us gruffly to pile in behind. Nor had we the least suspicion that he did this to keep us from seeing who he was.

Yelling to him to let us out at the farmhouse lane, just ahead, he evidently misunderstood us. For instead of stopping, he swung sharply into the lane. Then down the hill we went, lickety-cut.

Following a fearful unexpected crash, Peg and I shot through the air. And when I got a few of my senses back, there was the bob-tailed elephant on one side of me and Henny Bibbler on the other side. The car evidently had rammed into the air pocket. That is why I could see Henny and the elephant. For, of course, I was in the air pocket, too.

I looked around for the crack. But all I saw was the moon.

Then a monkey hopped into sight.

"Peanuts, peanuts; gumdrops, gumdrops, gumdrops," said a squeaky voice.

Red Meyers!

"Red," I cried, horrified.

"I'm in the air pocket, too, Jerry."

"But what changed you into a monkey?"

"Look at yourself—you're a pollywog."

And so I was. Still, as my mind further

cleared up, I seemed to take on my natural shape. And where was Red? He seemed to have completely disappeared.

"Laws-a-me!" came a high-pitched, happy voice. "It's my Henny—my long-lost Henny. And what a dirty face! I dare say, too, you've lost half your buttons. For boys always lose buttons and get holes in things. And land knows you've had time enough since I last saw you to lose a hundred buttons. . . . Did you clean your teeth?"

Mr. Meyers was there, too. Then Scoop whizzed into sight. So it slowly percolated into my bean that I wasn't in an air pocket, after all.

As for Red, I recognized him plainly enough when I got my eyes on him.

"You were knocked cuckoo, Jerry," he told me.

"Oh, Red!" I cried, clinging to his arm. "I'm so glad it wasn't true."

"What?"

"That you had turned into a monkey."

"Don't get fresh," said he, "or I'll sock you."

CHAPTER XIX

HOW BINGO LOST HIS TAIL

Later that night, with Mrs. Ellery sensibly jiggling the popcorn popper, and Mr. Ellery teasing the family cat, the detective, after admitting the inaccuracy of many of his earlier deductions, went over the whole confusing story in detail.

"As I told the boys this morning, Henny Bibbler either had run away from home, with or without his parents' consent, or, strangely, they had put him out of the way.

"In talking with the pleasing old lady, or, rather, in listening to her talk, I soon learned the truth of the matter. Pretending an interest in old clothes, I made the important discovery that Henny, before disappearing, had changed from his school clothes to his good clothes, sufficient proof to me that his mother had helped him off. For if he had changed his clothes on the sly, she undoubtedly would have mentioned it.

"Then I made the further amazing discovery that the conspicuously red-headed old man in the cabin wasn't the boy's father at all, as

everybody around here suspected, the nearest neighbors included, but the farmer's twin brother.

"Seeking a cause for the boy's sudden flight, I felt that I had it in the now known disappearance of his father. Could it be that the old farmer had skinned out, for certain unknown reasons? And was the young son searching for him? Did that explain the boy's disappearance? And did he know that his mother and uncle had connived to make it appear to the neighbors that the husband was still at home? These are some of the many probabilities that ran through my mind.

"It is Jerry's story that the old seaman disappeared the third night in January. And having proved that it was the farmer himself who disappeared, I set about, as best I could, to find out what had transpired in the farmhouse that memorable night.

"As you know, Jerry and Henny had left their bed to follow the latter's uncle to the old Rumson house, supposedly tenanted by the ghost of its former owner, an unprincipled sexton who had hung himself in the attic. Peeking through a window into the lighted house, the boys had seen what they mistook for a coffin on low wooden trestles. I will say here that this was *not* a coffin, but a cedar chest which the seaman had been building secretly

for his sister-in-law. And in order to complete it in time for her birthday, he had been working on it nights as well as days.

"Jerry has told you how he and Henny were sent home by the carpenter (much less of a scoundrel than the boys supposed), who, I dare say, chuckled to himself when he overheard their talk about his 'coffin.' He could have taken them into his confidence. But he preferred to mystify them. Scooting for home, at his sharp orders, they learned the following morning that not only had the seaman 'disappeared,' apparently never having returned to his bed, but the parents also had been called away during the night to help take care of a dying relative.

"How odd, though, was my thought, that Henny hadn't been awakened by his parents and thus informed of their intended departure. Could it be, I asked myself, that they had a secret object in thus quietly leaving the farmhouse in the dead of night?

"You can see how I worked things out, aided by my discovery of the supposed red-headed one's true identity. Having made that important discovery, the rest was easy. And here, in brief, is what happened:

"Mr. Bibbler, as you know, had a violent temper. But not until the past year did his wife suspect that these fits of temper were

caused by an unbalanced mind. Thereafter it worried her when Henny and his father were together, for she had overheard her husband muttering threats against the boy. Moreover, she was distressed by the thought that the son might inherit his father's growing affliction. The night that the boys followed the seaman to the haunted house, the old farmer's mind completely went to pieces. And there you have the true explanation of the bruises on Mrs. Bibbler's body. Later, to keep her secret, she stoutly denied that her husband had beaten her. But what she really meant was that the man who was masquerading as her husband (and he did this at her request, so anxious was she to hide her disgrace from the neighbors, it being her big hope that her husband would be able to come home in time, completely cured) had in no way mistreated her. . . . Is that clear to you?"

"Perfectly," nodded Mr. Ellery.

"You can imagine the unhappy scene that greeted the seaman upon his return from the haunted house. Admitted by his distracted sister-in-law, whose body was covered with bruises, he was told of the complete breaking-down of his brother's mind. What was to be done? Should the wife and brother summon the police? While they were discussing the situation (the farmer having dropped asleep),

the telephone rang. It was a call from Mendoto, in which city I spent several hours this afternoon, where, as I suspected, I found old Mr. Bibbler undergoing treatment in a private sanitarium specializing in mental disorders. He was taken to the sanitarium by his wife and brother, the three of them leaving the farmhouse on the night of January third (or, rather, on the morning of January fourth, for they left at two o'clock) in a single-seated buggy, after which Mrs. Bibbler attended the deathbed of her sister."

"But when did Uncle Jonah remove his stuff from the haunted house?" Mr. Ellery inquired.

"While Mrs. Bibbler was getting ready for their hasty departure."

"He drove over?"

"Yes. And while he was away his sister-in-law gathered up his clothes and carried them to the cabin, so that they would be ready for him later on."

"It was already agreed between them, then, that he was to impersonate his brother?"

"Yes."

"And was it a part of their scheme to keep Henny in the dark?"

"I think his mother would have awakened him that night, telling him the whole story, if Jerry hadn't been in the house."

"And it was to fool Jerry, then, more than

Henny, that the old lady made it appear in her note that Uncle Jonah had been left behind?"

"That's my opinion."

"And what became of the cedar chest and carpenter bench?"

"I dare say we'll find them hidden in the barn somewhere."

"The farmer was taken to the sanitarium; the wife attended the deathbed and later funeral of her sister. And then what?"

"Returning home with her brother-in-law (supposedly her husband), Mrs. Bibbler told Henny the truth about his father and the planned deception. The old lady was fearful that the unbalanced parent would escape from the sanitarium and take the boy's life, as he peculiarly had threatened to do the night he beat his wife. So she prevailed upon the younger one to leave home. It was for his own safety, she said. So there you have the true object of Henny's sudden flight—fearing that the boy's life would be taken if the father escaped from the sanitarium and found his way home, the distracted mother, whose pride kept her from confiding in her neighbors, had sent the boy away."

"Which explains why she had the strings tied in her gates," I put in.

"Yes," the detective smiled, "I noticed the strings. And, as you surmise, Jerry, they

were put there to warn her in case her husband returned at night. Well, to go on, I now had the object of the boy's sudden flight. Unquestionably he was safe. But, as his mother, following his disappearance, had professed not to know his whereabouts, my deduction was that it had been arranged between them that he was to run away secretly, so that in her later talk with the neighbors, and others, she could state truthfully that she didn't know where he was.

"But Henny, clever lad that he is, pulled an unexpected trick on his mother that night. Instead of simply running away after supper, as his mother had planned, he ran out of the house before supper, presumably to fill the pail at the spring. It was snowing. Halfway to the spring he stood perfectly still for more than twenty minutes. Then he backed up to the kitchen door. And there you have the true explanation of the uncompleted tracks, which mystified his mother and uncle as much as every one else. As for the 'voice' in the air, that undoubtedly was the work of the wind."

"Then it's your opinion," inquired Mr. Ellery, "that she really believed that she heard his 'voice' in the air?"

"Beyond all doubt."

"And her fright was genuine?"

"I have no occasion to think differently. Certainly, the uncompleted tracks were as

much of a mystery to her as to every one else who saw them. Unstrung as she was, it isn't surprising that she let herself imagine all kinds of fearful things. At first, she thought that Henny had been murdered. Then, in time, these fears vanished. And though he never wrote to her (such being their agreement), his whereabouts became fixed in her mind.

"It wasn't difficult to draw her out about her other relatives, whose names were all recorded in the family Bible. And learning that her oldest brother lived in Dixon, Illinois, sixty miles from here, where Henny undoubtedly was hiding, I called up this brother from Mendoto, telling him that Henny's father was now completely cured of his insanity, the sanitarium officials having so reported to me, making it appear in my conversation over the 'phone that it was necessary for the boy to come home at once. So he started out in an old delivery truck, which, as you know, was wrecked in the farmhouse lane, where the conscientious young driver preferred to hit a tree rather than an elephant, the last thing in the world, I dare say, that he expected to see in his parents' lane."

And this concludes the story of Henny Bibbler. So far as I know the "air-pocket" theory is still unproved. As for the elephant, which had been shipped to Tutter by mistake, Red's

uncle, having ordered a monkey, instead, it came out later on that the tail had been cut off at Newark when the elephant was being loaded into the car for shipment. And the tricky dealer, rather than lose the sale, or mark down the price, had sewed the tail back on, covering the stitched joint with painted adhesive tape. The attendant, sent along with the elephant, had kept out of our sight at the depot, and later, in carrying out his dishonest employer's instructions, had yanked off the broken tail, which made us responsible, as you might say, for the elephant's disfigurement. Having dropped asleep, Peg woke up to find the tail gone. Then is when he had telephoned to us. Later he had seen the attendant near the creek. Running away, the man had unintentionally dropped the tail in the berry patch. Peg followed up the hollow, and, as we know, had been taken prisoner and kept in the cave, the attendant wanting to make one more secret effort to recover the lost tail, to get it out of the way.

And here's how Bingo disappeared: Remember the straw stack in the pasture behind the carriage shed? Well, the tunnel, in which was a hidden trapdoor, was the secret entrance of an underground hut of Henny's. Staggering out of the carriage shed, while Peg was telephoning, the elephant had caved in the roof of

the hut; later, just before daybreak, and before we had searched the pasture, the wind upset the stack, as recorded, completely covering the elephant, who was too sick from over-eating to make much of an effort to escape. All the time we were poking around in the air, Bingo was in the hole, under the straw. And it was the action of the swirling wind, as it beat against the nearby cliffs, that made the whimpering voice sound above us.

While I was away that night, following the "ghost," Mr. Meyers, in learning where Red was, had gotten the unhappy runaway out of bed. Then they found Bingo, who, discovering that a mouse had parked itself in the hole, had noisily tramped his way to freedom. And the rest you know.

Later, the bob-tailed elephant was sent back to Newark, very much to our sorrow, for the mere fact that he had lost his tail made him none the less dear to us. Then the monkey came. But it wasn't much. Red was glad, I think, when it stuck its head in a salmon can and gagged to death.

Mr. Meyers kept getting bills. So I quit going over there. As for Red, when his folks saw how sunburned he was they hadn't the heart to switch him.

Anyway, Uncle Don, hearing about the mix-

up, laughingly sent the freckled one's parents a three-hundred-dollar check, which more than made up their loss. So they hadn't anything to crab about.

And now I'll wind up my story by telling you a few added facts about Uncle Jonah.

CHAPTER XX

CONCLUSION

There was a big time at the Bibbler farm when Henny's pa came home. All of the neighbors turned out to welcome him, telling him how well he looked. And, to that point, his eyes did have an entirely different expression. Earlier they had been wistful and blazing by turns. Now they were just plain kindly.

So you can rest assured that the troubles in the Bibbler family have ended for good. As red-headed as ever, the farmer has one bald spot, where the doctors at the sanitarium did something to his head—took out a piece of diseased skull, or something. Anyway, as I say, he's completely cured.

Not only were the neighbors glad to welcome the farmer home, but they were sorry for all the mean things that they had said about poor Uncle Jonah—only, in calling him "poor Uncle Jonah," don't get the idea that he was money poor. I guess not. He had many thousands of dollars saved up. You'll probably smile when I tell you that later on he got an awful crush on Mrs. Gordon. And after their marriage he

took little Chet to Boston where the eastern doctors fixed up the crippled one's bum leg. Chet thinks that the sun rises and sets in his new "pa." But the old seaman will always be "Uncle Jonah" to me.

He still laughs about the way he skulked up and down the darkened country roads with an empty market basket on his arm.

"All I did it fur," he explained, "was to give the neighbors something more to talk about, it being their notion that I was an unprincipled blackguard, anyway, and neck-deep in dark secrets."

He was mighty glad, he admitted, to get back into his own shoes. For his distracted sister-in-law, eager to keep the neighbors in the dark about her husband's affliction, had coaxed him into the impersonation scheme against his better judgment. He as much as told me so one day. And it was that same day that he told me the truth about the holes in the dirt floor at the haunted house. Instead of having hidden loot there, he had been searching for valuables, having gotten the idea that the sexton (a known miser) had used his cellar floor as a hiding place for his hoarded money.

"All I found, though," the old man told me, "was a set of false teeth."

"And what became of the skull?" I asked him next.

"*That?* Oh, I jest took it down fur fun."

"But you had a scared look," I told him, "the morning I met you in the post office."

"I wasn't scared, Jerry. But I *was* worried. Fur I saw that you was fast uncoverin' our secret. Not that I had anything to fear. But Martha, I knew, would be all upset if the truth came out."

"Uncle Jonah," I thrust out my hand, "you're a brick. And I hope you'll always let me be your friend."

"Um. . . . You're convinced, then," he spoke, with twinkling eyes, "that I hain't a thief?"

Like the rest of us, he had heard about the arrest of Mr. Bumblehopper's cousin, from whom the saw that the carpenter brought home to sharpen had been borrowed. Elbert Bumblehopper was the thief's name. And it is a peculiar coincidence that for more than four months he had been confined to his room with rheumatism, which explains why the robberies had stopped.

I could go on and explain a number of unimportant things that earlier puzzled me. But now that you have the ending of the story before you I don't know as that is necessary. Still, it might be well for me to mention a few of the things that seemingly entered into the mystery.

There was the johnnycake that Mrs. Bibbler baked the night of Henny's disappearance. Just as the detective had suspected, Henny had taken a portion of this to his uncle in the little cabin on the other side of the creek. And amused by my "air-pocket" theory, Mrs. Bibbler's sole object in telling me to "listen carefully" when I was near the spring was to mystify me and thus protect her secret. As for Axel Prentice, if you are at all concerned about his early disappearance, you'll have to draw on your imagination.

The night of the big party at Henny's house I was accompanied by a somewhat tall, long-legged, bright-eyed, wide-awake boy of my own age. And in much the same way that I presented him to Mrs. Bibbler and her friends, I'm now going to present him to you, assuming that among the many thousands of boys now reading the "Jerry Todd" books there are a few who never have met Poppy Ott.

So here he is, gang. One of the best buddies a fellow ever had. As I've said before, the angels were in a particularly happy mood when they screwed old Poppy together. For he's a wonderful kid. A Tutter boy, like myself, I write all of his books for him. I'm in every one of them, too. And what is of more importance, Red Meyers and other well-known Tut-

ter characters are in them, not overlooking the Stricker gang.

Poppy is an odd kid. One minute he's as sober as a church deacon. And the next minute he bubbles all over. He's what I call a natural-born business man. Upon first acquaintance, I thought that he was acting much too big for his shoes. And when he began talking about "Seven-League Stilts" to me, telling me how he and I were going to manufacture the new stilts in car-load lots, thus getting rich (see *"Poppy Ott's Seven-League Stilts"*), I told him to go home and put his ambition on a strict diet.

Our more recent adventures are recorded in the book, *"Poppy Ott and the Tittering Totem."* And I can think of no more pleasing and exciting way for you to get thoroughly acquainted with Poppy than to procure a copy of this fun-mystery book and read it, preface and all. Once you know Poppy for what he is, I'm sure you'll want to go back to the first book of the series and read each and every one of them.

Can you imagine Red Meyers and Rory Ringer running a newspaper? Not a kid proposition, but a real, honest-to-goodness, small-town newspaper. When Red told me that he was the Business Manager of the *Tutter Bugle* (the little newspaper with a big toot), I thought

I'd laugh myself sick. For I know Red! Then, to my sorrow, he dragged *me* into the crazy mess.

Editor-in-Grief is what my title should have been instead of Editor-in-Chief. For I sure had plenty of "grief," all right. And will I ever forget how furious the mayor's wife was when we published that account of her big lawn party under the heading:

Mayor's Wife Has Big Feet

It should have been "Fete." But you can't expect boys, unacquainted with type and the like, to get everything perfect.

And was Red ever clever in appointing *me* Editor-in-Chief. For on a newspaper the Editor, of course, has to take all the blame.

One deaf old man socked me over the bean with his ear pan because he took exception to something that we had printed about the republican party. But even worse that that, Rory, as the "make-up" man, got a society item into the "church" column by mistake, which made it appear that the Ladies' Aid Society of the Methodist church, "to awaken interest in the Terpsichorean art, and thus add to the grace and poise of the younger generation," was giving dancing lessons in the church parlors.

If you must know the truth of the matter,

that "Terpsichorean" junk almost got us into jail.

Remember the title: *"Jerry Todd, Editor-in-Grief."* A big thick book with a giggle in every galley (newspaper stuff!). And it's coming soon.

THE END

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JERRY TODD AND THE BOB-TAILED ELEPHANT
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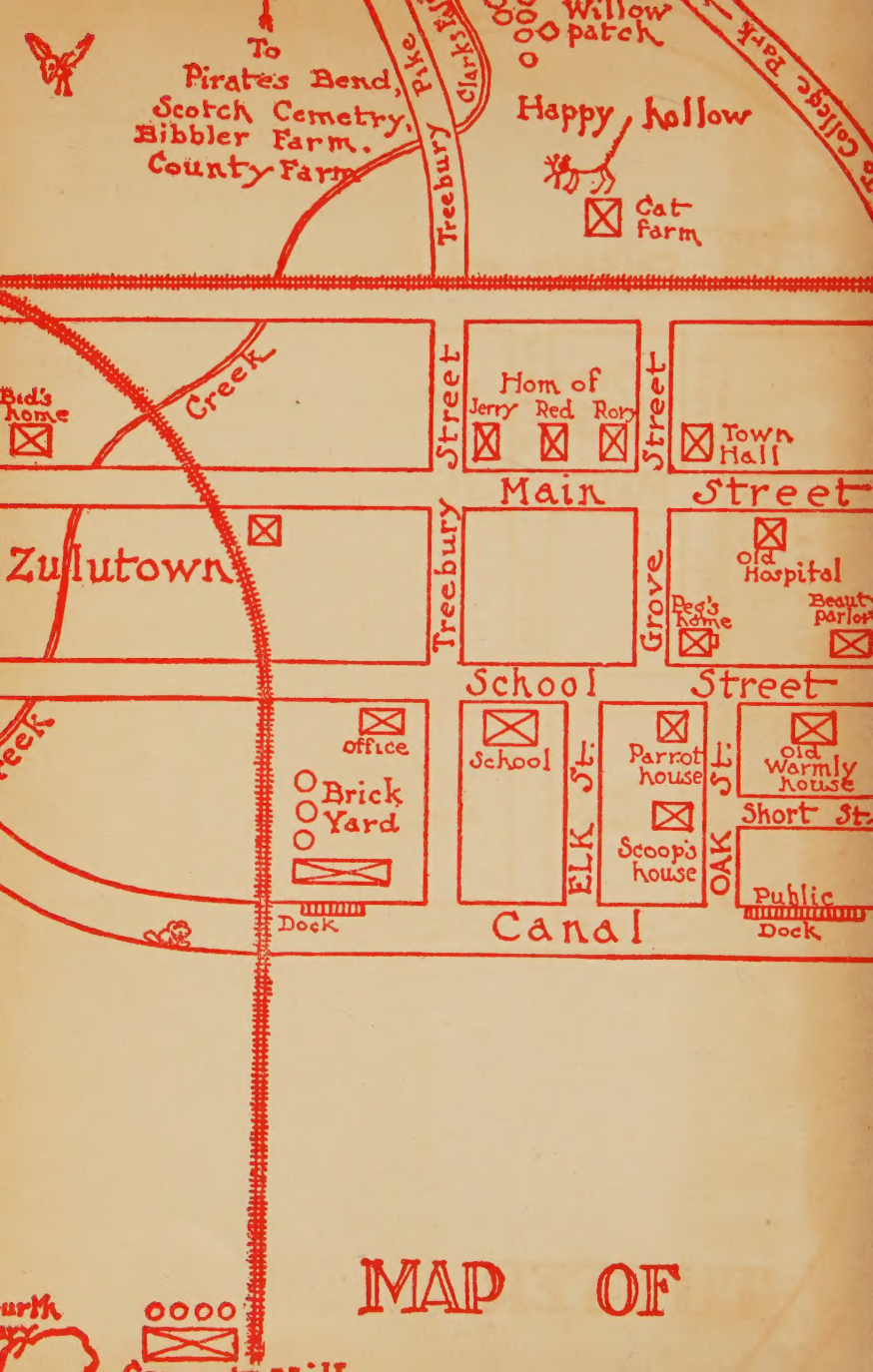
To
Pirates Bend,
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Treebury
Willow patch
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Cat farm
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Bid's Home
Creek
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School Street
office
Brick Yard
School
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Dock
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MAP OF

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